Part I

As all companions have, we have gone through a particular ceremony in which we must pass to truly become a Royal Arch Mason. That ceremony is “Passing the Veils”. Why is this ceremony important and what does it represent?

The ceremony of “Passing the Veils” or the use of the Veils in Royal Arch ceremonies is as old as the Degree itself although its origins seem to be lost in the oral traditions of ancient times. The Veils in early ceremonies were three in number, later a fourth was added in some countries (Most all, if not all, American Chapters today work in this “four-Veiled” ceremony). There are some scholars however believe that this elaborate ceremony did not always belong to the Royal Arch but rather it was part of, or wholly the ceremony of Excellent Master or High Excellent Master’s degree (Ireland; Scotland, and Bristol, England). This Excellent Master degree can also be seen in the Allied Masonic Degrees in America.

So what does this intricate ceremony signify?

It could be said that masonically, passing of the Veils signifies the enlightenment that comes with Masonic progression. While some academics say it symbolizes the problems or suffering encountered by the Jews on their returning journey from exile. Others believe that it involves the Veils of the Tabernacle of Moses and related to those of the Temple of Solomon. And still others consider it as a reference to Jesus, tying it to among other things the Veil of the last Temple upon His death.

What is the lesson that should ultimately be discovered in this ceremony? As said before I believe it to be lost in the oral traditions of the past. What do you believe? What do you think is the truth behind the symbolism?

The problem with this topic is where to start. There are many avenues in which I can take this discussion, but where to start? Should I start with the colors of the Veil? Or perhaps why our Veil system of America is different of that of Scotland or the United Kingdom? Should I talk about the Tribes of Israel and there banner colors vs. the colors that are on the High Priest Ephod? Or should I discuss the Veils or coverings of the tabernacle vs. the Veil that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place or the Holy of holies. But what about the journey we have made?

So let us begin with that journey, which we all have taken.
After we have all braved that rough and rugged road we come unto a tabernacle and we are met with resistance to enter, the first Veil. We explain to the Grand Master of the First Veil that we have come from captivity and our intent to help rebuild the temple and that we are the true descendents of the Giblimites that built the first temple. After that we are then challenged for entry, we recollect the lesson of the burning bush from which Moses spoke with the great I AM, with that we enter. We are given a sign and password. The sign is explained by a scripture reading from the book of Exodus 7: 10–12. The password is that of the three sons of Noah.

“These three names can allude to Noah’s Ark or the Ark of Safety. We could say that God was the architect, Noah was the builder and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth they were the craftsmen.”

We now come to a second Veil and are met with resistance. We then give the sign and password that we were divested with from the Grand Master of the First Veil. We are allowed to enter and although we are in fact Most Excellent Masters promoting the noble and glorious work of rebuilding the temple we are told that we cannot go further without the words and signs of the Grand Master of the Second Veil. We are given a sign and password. The sign is explained by a scripture reading from the book of Exodus 4: 6–7. The password is that of three builders of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant, or of Moses, is also known as the Ark of the Testimony. Along with Moses, Bezaleel (tribe of Judah) and Aholiab (tribe of Dan) were filled with spirit of God, wisdom, understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship and thus worked diligently until the tabernacle, Ark and all things belonging to it were made exactly as God had instructed.

Next we come to the Third Veil and again are met with resistance. We give the sign and password that we were divested with from the Grand Master of the Second Veil. Proving once again that we must be in fact Most Excellent Masters we promoting the noble and glorious work of rebuilding the temple we are permitted to enter but we can go no further without the words, signs and signet of the Grand Master of the Third Veil. The sign is thus explained by a scripture reading from the book of Exodus 4: 9. The password is that of the three principles to build the Second Temple and replace or substitute the arch of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. We are then given the Signet of Truth.

Alas, we come to the Grand Master of the Fourth Veil or Royal Arch Captain. We give the sign and password that we were divested with from the Grand Master of the Third Veil, we then present the Signet of Truth. We are then told to wait until the Grand Council is informed of or request to enter. The Grand Council recognizes or request and permits us to enter.

This completes our initial journey through the Veils.
PART 2

So now that we went through the journey of “Passing the Veils” where should we go? I guess a suitable place to go is; what is the right number of veils one should go through? Previously I stated, “The Veils in early ceremonies were three in number, later a fourth was added in some countries (and most all, if not all, American (whether they are Prince Hall or otherwise) Chapters today work in this “four-Veiled” ceremony”).

Comp. F. A. M. Taylor, Assistant Librarian for the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of England; wrote in 1932, “The veils were doubtless a part of early ceremony of the Arch Degree and the working of the same discontinued, I believe, at the Union in 1817.” He goes on to state, that it appears that the, “passing of the veils” was extensively in the early part of the 19th century. No account of what the ceremony was, or any records are to be found in minutes of the early English Chapters.

What should the proper system of veils that one should pass? What do the veils really represent? I think this is the basis of what we should look into. Depending on what you say the Veils represent you can state your argument.

Ernest Cooke, Provincial Grand Superintendent of Bristol (England), informs us that until 1929 only three veils were used in the Chapters of that Province. In 1932 after much research and careful consideration, the use of the fourth veil (White) was authorized. He based much of his argument on the fact that one, they were in use in the early Chapters. (There is no proof of this). And two, the description of the Tabernacle in Exodus is so definite

A point of interest comes from the Comp. F. A. M. Taylor, Asst. Librarian of the English Grand Chapter in 1932. He states that it was the practice to have three “Masters of the Veils”, who were officers of the Chapter (Which officers, is not stated.). Being armed with a sword and bearing a banner of appropriate color, were stationed at the Blue, Purple and Scarlet veils (The White veil is guarded by the RA. Captain (as it is in our Ritual)).

I will start off with the “traditional” three- Veiled system then unto the four -Veiled system. So the basic question is “Why three veils”? Before we go any further let’s break down what a veil is. If you go to Wikipedia or other website you can find various meanings of veil, from veils for women to headgear and so on, veils have several meanings. The word "veil" in the Hebrew speaks of a screen, something that conceals and separates. With that said lets break down these systems.

In the book, “Secret Societies of all Ages and Countries” by C.W. Heckethorn (1897) he mentions only three veils. “The Textbook of Freemasonry” (1870) which is irregular and an unauthorized publication, supposedly giving all the ceremonies of the Craft and the Royal Arch, the author states that the ceremony is sometimes dispensed with. Here reference is made to only three veils. A quote from “The Perfect Ceremonies of the Royal Arch Degree,” Lewis (1907)
states, “The ceremony is said to follow the restoration to light. The ceremony is carried out with only three veils”. (Italicized words done by me)

I believe the original intent was to imitate the tabernacle of Moses. In that Tabernacle, properly there were three veils or curtains. It is said these veils were used to hide the glory of God's face or presence from the people or to separate a sinful man from a Holy God.

The first veil was the eastern gate which opened into the courtyard. Those who came to present offerings to God (this is where the Brazen Alter was) could pass through this veil or gate (Ex. 40:33). This “Passover Veil” separates the courtyard of Moses' tabernacle from the world.

The next veil allowed only the priests to enter the Holy Place (Ex. 40:28). This was the first veil into the tabernacle. The Holy place is the place of testimony, of spiritual bread, and the offering up of the prayers and praises. This “Pentecost Veil” separates the courtyard from the Holy Place.

The last veil was only for the High Priest, who once a year could enter into the Holy of Holies (Ex. 40:21). This was the place that the Ark of the Covenant rested. This Holy place was where the High Priest would give up offering and provoke the ineffable name of Deity. In the Tabernacle there was a table, but no chair for Aaron or any of the priests to sit on, for their work was never finished. Although there was no chair; there was one seat, the Mercy-seat reserved for The Almighty Himself who sat there between the cherubim. The “Tabernacles Veil” separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place where God "sat" on the mercy seat.

“I will commune with thee from above the Mercy Seat, from between the two cherubim’s which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.”

Exodus 25:17-22

Another correlation to these three veils above is the three annual feasts of Israel (which some believe, four have been achieved or celebrated).

“Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the LORD empty.”

Deuteronomy 16:16

However, I will not go into more detail about them during this paper... lol (Research is a beautiful thing. I implore you to do some more, let me know how it goes!)

So here we have several questions. If the veils were representing those of the tabernacle, Why do we have four veils? Is there or should there be a three or four Veils?
If you look at the veils of the tabernacle there are three. But what of the “true” veil of the Tabernacle. There are four colors to it; does this represent the meaning of the veils as we see it today? So why do we have four veils? Why are there three Masters of the Veils and not four? Why is the “fourth veil” guarded by the Royal Arch Captain and not another Master of the veil?
PART 3

In our current ceremony we have the approach of the Sojourners to Jerusalem that seek to contribute in the rebuilding of the Temple but as the approach they are met by presence of four standard, or banner bearers. We have already discussed this “passing” and some other interesting information. Now we will get into the four-veiled system that is in use today.

How many veils or banners should we have? As we have them now, there are four in number and that their colors are blue, purple, scarlet, and white (Although, in English Chapters all the tribes of Israel’s (12) banners are displayed). What we also know in our particular system is that the devices/images on these banners are a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle.

We know that there were twelve tribes, but why did our forefathers only choose to incorporate four? The several reasons why we can assume ritualist chose four. One reason is in how the twelve tribes governed themselves under Moses. Another is in their positions of encampment; these twelve tribes were divided into four larger groups of three tribes each. The four governing tribes of the four groups Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan were recognized as tribal leaders.

Today we can accredit our adaptations of our banners by the Talmudists view of the four principal tribes of the Jews. Some of the Targumists, or Jewish biblical commentators, say that the color of the banner of each tribe was corresponds to the stone which represented that tribe in the ephod and breast-plate of the high priest. What do the scholars say the colors should be? Well, this is the problem! Not only do religious scholars disagree on what the colors are (and where they were placed upon the ephod) as they relate to religion or theological aspects but so do ritualist disagree on the colors and proper arrangements of the banners used in the Royal Arch.

Well, what do we have and what should be the right way to display our banners/veils? I can answer the former but as for the latter I would not be as bold to say what it should be but my hope is that you can be educated on what we have.

What we use today:
1. Tribe of Dan - An Eagle on a Blue Banner (green in Canada) - North
2. Tribe of Reuben. - Man on a Purple Banner (red in Canada) - South
3. Tribe of Ephraim - An Ox on a Scarlet Banner (red in Canada) - West
4. Tribe of Judah. - A Lion on a White Banner (red in Canada) - East

http://encyclopediaoffreemasonry.com/b/banners-royal-arch/

What do the some Jewish scholars say what the colors should be?
1. Tribe of Dan – An Eagle of gold on a blue background. - North
2. Tribe of Reuben – A Man on gold background. - South
3. Tribe of Ephraim –An Ox of black on gold background. - West
4. Tribe of Judah – A Lion of gold with a scarlet background. - East

http://www.bible-history.com/tabernacle/TAB4The_Encampment.htm
Notice I used “some” in the description above. As I stated before there are varying description on what they should be (and where they were placed upon the ephod). As for Canada it is their belief that the colors should be red for the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Reuben; and green for Dan; these being the colors of the precious stones sardonyx, ligure, carbuncle, and chrysolite, by which these tribes were represented in the high priest’s breast-plate.

With some confidence we can conclude that our system, as it is today, does not correlate to the colors of each tribes banners nor do they represent the colors that correspond to the jewels upon the ephod. So what do they represent? Masonically, what were we taught?

The Blue Veil is symbolic of universal friendship and benevolence, represented in the Symbolic Degrees through which the candidate has already passed.

The Purple Veil is symbolic of union, and represents the intimate connection between the Ancient Craft and Royal Arch Masonry.

The Scarlet Veil is a symbol of fervency and zeal, and is the distinct color of Royal Arch Masonry, indicating that only these qualities can the candidate be successful in his search for Truth.

The White Veil is a symbol of purity, and is a reminder to the candidate, who is now almost at the close of his search in Royal Arch Masonry, that it is only by purity of heart and life that he can hope to be successful in, or found worthy of the reception of Divine Truth

http://masonic.wikidot.com/four-veils

Why are the banners, in relation with the particular tribes, assembled in such a manner as it is today? Ummm. That’s a great question. I can be sure that I have no plausible reason why. I have a few theories as to why, but these are my speculations as to why.

In The Symbolism of Freemasonry, Albert Mackey states; “The veils, too, according to Josephus, were intended for symbolic instruction in their color and their materials. Collectively, they represented the four elements of the universe; and, in passing, it may be observed that this notion of symbolizing the universe characterized all the ancient systems, both the true and the false, and that the remains of the principle are to be found everywhere, even at this day, pervading Masonry, which is but a development of these systems. In the four veils of the tabernacle, the white or fine linen signified the earth, from which flax was produced; the scarlet signified fire, appropriately represented by its flaming color; the purple typified the sea, in allusion to the shell-fish murex, from which the tint was obtained; and the blue, the color of the firmament, was emblematic of air.”

One could assume that they were arranged according to their order of march while in the desert during the Exodus. However, this does not explain their colors but, we shall move on. So what was there order of march during travel?

The following is the order in which this vast company proceeded in their march:
- Under the standard of **Judah** Issachar Zebulun
  Gershonites, and Merarites carrying the tabernacle and its Holt y artifacts.
- Under the standard of **Reuben** Simeon Gad
  the Kohathites with the sanctuary.
- Under the standard of **Ephraim** Manasseh Benjamin
  Under the standard of **Dan** Asher Naphtali.

The above can be read in the KJV Number 10:13-27

If this were true and our ancient ritualist were correlating our earthly/ Masonic travels with that of the tribes travels out of bondage they would of gotten it wrong. Could this be an over sight of our educated ritualist, I think not but I believe it something to look into.

Finally, we could presume that our forefathers assemble the veils in such a manner to relate the rite of circumambulation. We start are journey in the North (Tribe of Dan— a veil of blue) in which is masonically a place of darkness, that part of the earth, which, being most removed from the influence of the sun at his meridian height, a symbol of the profane world. We then move on to the South (Tribe of Reuben – a veil of purple) a place of beauty, a symbol of the meridian sun or the noon of life, emblematic of manhood’s approaching years. It is that period of life when half our years lie behind us and half before, with opportunities remaining to do good or be better. We further to the West (Tribe of Ephraim – a veil of scarlet) a place of strength, symbolic of the eve of life and I bring from the station of the setting sun, the consolation of a journey ended, the joy of life well spent. Finally to the East (Tribe of Judah – a veil of white), where we should be engulfed with wisdom, the east is emblematic of the rising sun and the dawn of life. As the sun rises in the East, it drifts over the meridian heights in the South and sets in the West, so is our life.

There are other explanations as to what the veils allude to depending on your religious orientation is. What do the passing veils mean to you? Is it the representation of the true veil of the tabernacle separating man from god or when we as Masons overcome the veils of ignorance, hatred, unbelief, and gain Truth in our God? Or the relationship to the veils to Jesus. Or that as we pass each veil we become dressed as a symbolic High Priest and once in the inner sanctum where we are found pure, give up our adorations unto our Deity. Whatever the meaning is, I hope you have learned something today and know what we do is more than regurgitating words in a book.