

The Jewish and Christian Sources of the Legend of the Vault

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ABSTRACT

Whether “Royal Arch” or “Scottish Rite,” degrees based on the legend of the Vault play a key role in most Masonic systems. The origin of this central Masonic legend of a “secret vault”—a hidden, mysterious place, but one open to the divine presence—therefore has deep roots in the oldest “esoteric” ideas of Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, these important religious sources could have been well known to scholarly Masons in the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Royal Arch, Scottish Rite, Vault, Masonic esotericism

Las fuentes judías y cristianas de la leyenda de la bóveda

RESUMEN

Ya sea "Royal Arch" o "Scottish Rite", los títulos basados en la leyenda de la Bóveda juegan un papel clave en la mayoría de los sistemas masónicos. El origen de esta leyenda masónica central de una "bóveda secreta", un lugar misterioso y oculto, pero abierto a la presencia divina, tiene por tanto profundas raíces en las ideas "esotéricas" más antiguas del judaísmo y el cristianismo. Además, estas importantes fuentes religiosas podrían haber sido bien conocidas por los eruditos masones del siglo XVIII.

Palabras clave: Arco Real, Rito Escocés, Bóveda, Esoterismo masónico

墓穴传说的犹太教起源和基督教起源

摘要

无论是“皇家拱门”（Royal Arch）还是“苏格兰礼仪”，基于墓穴传说（legend of the Vault）的级别在大多数共济会成员体系中都发挥了关键作用。“秘密墓穴”（secret

vault) —一个隐蔽、神秘，但对神圣开放的地方——作为关键的共济会传说，其起源因此根植于犹太教和基督教最古老的“秘传”观点。此外，这些重要的宗教来源本能够在18世纪被研究学术的共济会成员广为知晓。

关键词：皇家拱门（Royal Arch），苏格兰礼仪，墓穴，共济会秘传主义（Masonic esotericism）

Whether “Royal Arch” or “Scottish Rite,” degrees based on the legend of the Vault play a key role in most Masonic systems. Indeed, they are in all likelihood variants derived from the same English early high degree of “Scots Master.” The symbolic framework of these degrees seems likely to have been established in two phases. Firstly, the British “Scots Master”—and its continental equivalent, “Maître Écossais”—were characterized by a legend placing them in the ruins of Solomon’s Temple, with the recipient rediscovering—on the ground, under a stone, at the base of a column, but otherwise unspecified—the lost secret of the true name of God. Subsequently—in an almost natural “dramatic” development—this discovery was transferred to a forgotten vault in the Temple’s foundations, with the Scots Master developing into the Royal Arch. The practice of continental, and in particular French, Masonry, would go on to bear traces of both developmental strata: thus, in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the fifth degree of “Maître Parfait” (Perfect Master) appears to be a French equivalent of the very first Scots Masters, and the thirteenth degree of “Chevalier de

Royal Arch” (Knight of the Royal Arch) incorporates the legend of the Vault. In this, however, Freemasonry would appear to have merely adopted and built into the degree system a much older idea that can be found in the esoteric wing of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as sources alluding to the existence of a hidden, secret vault under Solomon’s Temple with supposedly divine attributes can be found in both Judaism and Christianity. Looking at these texts in chronological order, I will first refer to a number of Hebrew references that, as far as I am aware, have not previously been considered in connection with this legend, before reviewing the classic sources identified by English masonic historians.

I. In the Bible

Thought to have been written around 125 BC in Alexandria, in a community of Hellenistic Jews, the Second Book of the Maccabees provides an account of the struggles of the Israelites, and in particular, of course, of the Maccabean Revolt (from 175 to 140 BC) and the martyrdom of the Holy Maccabees. Faced with danger, the ser-

vants of the Temple decided to remove its most sacred items in order to protect them from destruction by the Israelites' enemies: chapter 2, verse 4¹ explains that:

... The prophet [Jeremias], being warned by God, commanded that the tabernacle and the ark should accompany him, till he came forth to the mountain where Moses went up, and saw the inheritance of God.

And when Jeremias came thither he found a hollow cave: and he carried in thither the tabernacle, and the ark, and the altar of incense, and so stopped the door.

Then some of them that followed him, came up to mark the place: but they could not find it.

And when Jeremias perceived it, he blamed them, saying: "The place shall be unknown, till God gather together the congregation of the people, and receive them to mercy.

And then the Lord will shew these things, and the majesty of the Lord shall appear, and there shall be a cloud as it was also shewed to Moses, and he shewed it when Solomon prayed that the place might be sanctified to the great God."

Here the Ark of the Covenant is therefore hidden on Mount Sinai in a "hollow cave," suggesting a troglodyte

or cave dwelling, of which there are many in the Middle East. Other translations also refer to "a chamber in a cave." The door is so well sealed that Jeremias' companions are unable to find the location: it is thus in effect a kind of hidden secret vault, not yet below the Temple, but still in a place with a pivotal role in the history of Israel—Mount Sinai—and secret and sacred since it can only be revealed by theophany. The Second Book of the Maccabees is not included in the Hebrew Bible, but solely in the Catholic and Orthodox canons. It is acknowledged in the Protestant tradition but considered simply to be an interesting intertestamental text.

II. The Jerusalem Talmud

Also from the Jewish tradition, a passage from the *Shekalim* tractate in the Jerusalem Talmud (c. 400 AD) recounts that:

[Members] of the household of Rabban Gamaliel and of Rabbi Hananiah the chief of the priests ... had a tradition from their forefathers that the Ark was hidden there [in the place of the fourteenth prostration]. It once happened that a priest who was busy [there] noticed that the floor [of the wood storage area] was different from the others. He went and told it to his friend but before he had time to finish his words his soul departed. Then they knew for certain that there the Ark was hidden It is said

1 I am grateful to Thomas Dufresne for pointing me to this reference.

in the name of Rabbi Oshia that he struck his hammer upon the stone, that it emitted a spark that consumed him.²

This Rabbinical tradition is discussed by various exegetes, with the concealment of the Ark underground often attributed to King Josiah. In his fifteenth-century commentary on the Book of Kings, for example, scholar and statesman Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508) recounts that:

Solomon knew that the Temple would be destroyed. And so he had a labyrinthine hiding place built under the floor of the shrine, and had a stone put there on which he placed the Ark, and also a flask of manna, Aaron's rod, and the anointing oil.³

It is no great distance from this “labyrinthine hiding place” to a vault. Even today, some rabbis believe that those who pray at the Wailing Wall do not gather before an archaeological remnant but stand merely a stone's throw from the Ark of the Covenant, still housed “in a labyrinthine hiding place” in the heart of the Temple Mount.

This story also forms part of the Christian tradition, in which it is reported in several books. During the

very period in which modern Freemasonry was taking shape, Humphrey Prideaux's influential work *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations* (1717 with numerous subsequent editions; translated into French from 1722), recounted that:

What became of the old ark, on the destruction of the temple ... is a dispute among the rabbis But most of them will have it that King Josiah, being foretold by Huldah the prophetess, that the temple would speedily after his death be destroyed, caused the ark to be put in a vault underground, which Solomon foreseeing this destruction, had caused of purpose to be built, for the preserving of it.⁴

We see therefore how an unspecified hidden place under the Temple became a “labyrinthine hiding place” and finally a “vault under ground.”

III. Philostorgius' Church History

The interest of English Masonic historians in the origins of the legend of the Royal Arch natu-

2 *Mishnah Yomit*, “Mishnah Shekalim”, trans. Joshua Kulp, chapter 6. Available online at: https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shekalim?lang=bi.

3 Reference and translation into French kindly provided by M. Maurice Kriegel, director of studies at the EHESS. I am very grateful to him, and to my friend Jean Passini for his assistance with this research. Translator's note: Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

4 Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations*, 9th edition (London: Knaplock & Tonson, 1725), Part I, 212.

rally goes back a long way.⁵ They have identified a Christian source, of which the earliest evidence also dates back to Antiquity, with a Greek author, Philostorgius, describing a hidden vault under the Temple. Philostorgius (c. 370 AD–c. 430 AD) was the author of a *Church History* in twelve books, known to us only through an epitome produced by the Byzantine scholar and patriarch Photius (c. 820–90 AD). Despite being the work of a “heretic”—Philostorgius was an “Arian”—fairly extensive use has been made of this *Church History*, as it recounts numerous episodes in the ancient history of Christianity. Photius’ epitome was translated into a French edition published by Louis Cousin in 1676, and includes the episode involving the hidden, secret “Vault.” In this account, the Emperor Julian (355–363) decided to rebuild the Temple in an effort to invalidate Jesus’ prophecy that it would be destroyed forever (Mt 24.2). During the initial work on the foundations, a stone was moved, revealing the entrance to a cave carved out from the rock. A worker fell in and upon feeling around, found a plinth with a scroll placed on top. When he came back up, this was discovered to consist of the first verse of the Prologue to John’s Gospel. Here, quite naturally given the Christian context, the discovery no longer concerns the Ark of the Covenant, but rath-

er the book of the New Covenant, and this is in fact the “Legend of the Vault” in the Irish tradition of the Royal Arch. Century after century, the tradition was maintained in certain circles and among religious scholars: first in Protestantism, where a key reference to the legend can be found in Samuel Lee’s *Orbis Miraculum, or the Temple of Solomon* (London, 1659), and then in a Catholic context, with three pages dedicated to it in Abbé Fleury’s influential *Histoire ecclésiastique* (1724, vol. 4, 89–91): a highly successful work present in all good French libraries in the eighteenth century. Philostorgius’ legend was often supplemented by aspects drawn from the work of another ancient author, Ammianus Marcellinus, one of Julian’s contemporaries and a committed pagan hostile to Christianity. In his account, during the abortive attempt to rebuild Solomon’s Temple, the laborers were also prevented from continuing their work by balls of fire that burst from the foundations and made the place inaccessible (see Ammianus Marcellinus, trans. C. D. Yonge, *Roman History* [London: Bohn, 1862], Book 23; and Fleury, 91). In a Biblical context, “fire is a sign of divine presence and action.”⁶ The work on the Temple foundations therefore brought about a theophany.

The connection between these religious sources and Masonry is not

5 For an overview of the sources of the legend of the Royal Arch identified by English Masonic historians, the reader is referred to two seminal works: Bernard E. Jones on the Royal Arch in *Freemason’s Book of the Royal Arch* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1957), 126–130, and Harry Carr, *Harry Carr’s World of Freemasonry: The Collected Papers and Talks of Harry Carr* (London: Lewis Masonic, 1983), 172–4 and 359.

6 Marcel Viller, Charles Baumgartner, and André Rayez, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (Beauchesne: Paris, 1964), “Feu,” vol. V, 247.

merely hypothetical, since *Le Nouveau Catéchisme des Francs-maçons, contenant tous les mystères de la maçonnerie*, an exposé from the 1740s, makes explicit reference to the episode (long note on pages 31 and 32) and refers to Abbé Fleury's work.

The origin of this central Masonic legend of a “secret vault”—a hidden, mysterious place, but one open to the divine presence—therefore has deep roots in the oldest “esoteric” ideas of Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, these important religious sources could have been well known to scholarly Masons in the eighteenth century.