

SUPREME GRAND ROYAL ARCH CHAPTER
OF
NEW ZEALAND

HAURAKI DISTRICT

THE BREASTPLATE
OF THE
HIGH PRIEST

Prepared for the use of the Companions by
RE Comp JD Anderson Grand Superintendent

Introduction

The Third Principal of New Zealand Royal Arch Chapters is invested with a "breastplate" on the occasion of the Annual Installation of his Chapter.

Many Companions have wondered what it symbolises.

Those seen in Chapters are many and varied in design and range from comfortable to extremely uncomfortable to wear.

The paper that follows is a modification of a paper I prepared and presented to The Research Chapter of New Zealand as my Inaugural Lecture on 20th June 1989.

I trust that it will be of interest to new companions and provide a much needed explanation of what at first glance must seem a clumsy and unusual piece of regalia.

JD Anderson

Grand Superintendent.

THE BREASTPLATE OF THE HIGH PRIEST

Its Symbolism to the Hebrews and to Royal Arch Masons

What was the Breastplate of the High Priest?

The following description of the Breastplate is taken from James Strong's book *The Tabernacle Of Israel*.

Strong describes the Breastplate (or 'the Pectoral') as follows:

'It was substantially a bag of the same materials as the ephod itself, one span (or half a cubit, i.e., about ten inches) square, when folded at the bottom and sewed together at the sides. The face (or outer layer) had on it (apparently stitched on like studs, at regular intervals, but probably very close together, so as to bend to fit the person) gold plates, ... in which were set precious stones, in four rows, engraved respectively with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel ... the sacred pocket thus suspended over the very heart of the high priest, where it would be inviolably safe, and at the same time accessible at a moment's notice, was designed ... as a place of deposit for the most priceless blessing of God to His fallen, erring children, a mode of ascertaining His will. The physical instrument of this form of divine communication was the famous Urim and Thummim, Hebrew terms that have greatly vexed the learning and ingenuity of

interpreters, with less satisfactory results, perhaps, than any other part of the whole Tabernacle's apparatus.'

A peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory ...

I believe that our forefathers in Speculative Freemasonry identified a great need of contemporary society when they concentrated so much of the teachings of the Craft on moral philosophy taught and illustrated by allegory and symbols.

I equally believe that today's society, both within and without the Craft, is sorely in need of a re-emphasising of morality and philosophy.

My paper then, will concentrate predominantly on establishing the symbolism and significance of the Breastplate to the Israelites and, because of its place in New Zealand Royal Arch regalia, attempt to draw out the symbolism and significance this item should have to both its wearers, our Third Principals, and to those Companions who see it worn in our Chapters.

Importance in masonic teaching

"The Breastplate ... is an ancient symbol which we do not explain to our companions. Its importance in Masonic teaching extends far beyond its mere historical significance." (H Wyatt P G Lec., PZ Research Chapter of NZ—19th September, 1972)

What then is "its importance in Masonic teaching"?

Masonic references

Let us begin by briefly looking at such references as there are in our New Zealand Royal Arch rituals to this item of regalia and at such explanations and symbolic teachings as are therein given.

Book of Constitution (Eleventh Edition, March 1982):

Part X sets out the regalia required by the New Zealand Constitution. Rule 140 provides 'It shall not be necessary for Chapters to provide for their office-bearers clothing other than the apron, sash, collar and jewel, but such Chapters as wish it may, in addition, procure for their office-bearers the following, viz. ... (3) For the Third Principal, a pale blue Robe, trimmed with ermine, a mitre, a breastplate, and a sceptre of office.'

The Royal Arch Ritual

The Seventh Edition of the Ritual approved for use in New Zealand Constitution Chapters has no direct or indirect reference to the Breastplate, either in rubric or ritual.

The Installation Ritual

The 1975 edition of the Installation Ritual approved by Grand Chapter, refers to the Breastplate in these terms:

(1) In the Investiture of the Third Principal:

'I invest you with the Clothing, Jewels and symbols of your Office ... The Breastplate, which was only worn by the High Priest of Israel on great and solemn occasions, should remind you of the solemn nature of the duties you have bound yourself to perform, and that you should at all times present to your Companions an example of moral and religious rectitude

(2) In the Address to the Third Principal:

'... The Breastplate with which you are decorated, in imitation of that upon which were engraven the names of the twelve tribes, and worn by the High Priest of Israel, is to teach you that you are always to bear in mind your responsibility to the Laws and Ordinances of the Institution and that the honour and interests of your Chapter and its members should always be near your heart''

These then are the only references in our New Zealand Rituals!

In passing, it may be of interest to reflect upon the confusion in the mind of a newly installed and invested Third Principal, upon hearing those charges, but being a member of a Chapter where, as allowed for in the Constitution, the Breastplate is not provided!

How do other Constitutions in New Zealand fare?

Inquiries to the **Irish Constitution** elicited the statement that the breastplate did not figure in their ceremonies at all, either as regalia or in ritual charges.

Reference to **Scottish Constitution** elicited the following:

(a) Rule 36, clause 12 of their Book of Constitution makes no mention of a Breastplate.

(b) The Jewel of the Third Grand Principal is a breastplate worn as a collar jewel.

(c) During the Installation of the Third Principal there is a reading by the Chaplain from Leviticus 8:8 'and he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and Thummim' BUT the Third Principal is not invested with a Breastplate.

(d) There is an address to the Third Principal which begins as follows

'The Breastplate with which you are decorated...'

An inquiry to **the English Constitution** provided the comment: 'except for one of our Chapters ... we do not use the breastplate - the only reference to it being in the Scripture reading to the Third Principal, Leviticus 8:8 ...'

Bernard Jones, in his *Freemasons' Book of the Royal Arch*, has a page and a half devoted to the Breastplate. The following quotations are of interest:

- 'The High Priest of some old chapters, when he happened to be the Third Principal, wore a breastplate. In a very few chapters today he still does so...'
- 'Made in 1777 is a breastplate forming part of the regalia of the Lodge of Unanimity, Wakefield,,,'
- 'In Sincerity Chapter, No 600, Bradford, the Third Principal wears at Installation meetings a breastplate...'
- 'In the Royal Cumberland Chapter, No 41, Bath, dating back to 1782, the Third Principal wears at all meetings a breastplate ...'
- 'The J. wears a breastplate in the Bristol chapters and in the Chapter of St James, No 2, London.'

It seems fairly evident that most of the United Kingdom Constitutions and rituals have the same readings as are in the New Zealand ritual, but only in New Zealand do we **generally** invest Third Principal Jeshua with a breastplate.

Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Volume 1, page 151, tells us that "The breastplate is worn in American Chapters of the Royal Arch by the High Priest as an essential part of his official vestments,'

Biblical references.

We shall begin by recognising that the establishment of the High Priesthood, his selection, anointing and the manner of dress of the High Priest was by God's express command and detailed directions. It can therefore be accepted that nothing of these was unimportant to God and therefore of course to the Israelites.

Consider the following:

Exodus 28:1 'and take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother ... from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto Me in the priest's office ...' Here we have Aaron's Priestly Appointment by God's express command.

Exodus 28:2 'And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty.' Here we have a clear instruction that the priestly garments were NOT 'common' garments but were for 'glory' and 'beauty'. Exodus lists eight main pieces of apparel speaking of Aaron's perfection as a Priest and 'for glory and beauty'.

Exodus 29:4 'And Aaron ... thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of

the congregation and shalt wash ... with water.' Here we have Aaron's Purification by God's express command.

Exodus 29:7 'Then shalt thou take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him'. Here we have Aaron's Sanctification by God's express command.

Exodus 28:15-21 commands 'And thou shalt make a breastplate of judgment, the work of the skilful workman' and then describes very specifically its construction.

Exodus 28:29-30 'And Aaron shall bear the names of the Children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart ... and thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim

The Priestly activity of Aaron can be summed up in seven words: to 'keep the charge of the Lord' (Leviticus 8:35)

We may summarise as follows:

1. the office of High Priest was ordained by God,
2. the dress of the High Priest was specified in detail by God,
3. the function of the High Priest was clearly defined by God,
4. the purpose of the breastplate as a repository of the Urim and Thummim, the means of direct communication with God by the High Priest on behalf of the Israelites, was clearly described by God,
5. the engraving of the names of the twelve tribes on the stones of the breastplate was by God's special command and
6. that the High Priest would 'bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually' was a requirement of God.

All of these points would be well known and understood by the ancient Israelites and the appearance of the High Priest in his priestly regalia would be a constant reminder to them of God's very specific directions as

to the office, function and importance of the High Priest.

Symbolism

How then can we relate the high importance and meaning of the Breastplate of the High Priest to the Israelites of old, with the relative paucity of explanation and symbolism existing in our Royal Arch rituals and ceremonies?

To the Israelites, the Breastplate was an effective means of direct communication with God; it was of practical purpose not essentially symbolic.

The Antiquities of The Jews by Josephus, adduces symbolism to the Breastplate as follows (page 90):

'He also appointed the breastplate to be placed in the middle of the ephod, to resemble the earth, for that was the very middle place of the world ... And for the twelve stones, whether we understand by them the months, or whether we understand the like number of the signs of that circle which the Greeks call the Zodiac, we shall not be mistaken in their meaning.'

Masonic Symbolism

A review then, of the Masonic symbolism we have been able to establish seems to lead to the conclusion that:

- as the Breastplate is personal only to the Third Principal, the symbolism is also personal to him.
- it teaches a personal responsibility to 'the laws and ordinances of the Institution'.
- it teaches 'that the honour and interests of (the) chapter and its members should always be near (the) heart' of the Third Principal.
- it reminds the Third Principal 'of the solemn nature of the duties' he has bound himself to perform.
- it reminds him that he should 'at all times present to (the) companions an example of moral and religious rectitude.'

It seems appropriate to quote here from the Crombie ritual, page 16, an extract from an address to the Third Principal) where, speaking of Jeshua the son of Josadek the High Priest, the Installing Principal says -

' ... His name has been transmitted to us inseparably connected with the office he bore, and it has been the immemorial privilege of every

constituted Chapter annually to elect from among themselves a companion worthy to represent that great and illustrious character. You, my Companion, now do so, and to you I have only to represent the necessity of a strict adherence to the duties of the office, and more especially to recommend to you the study of the religious institutes prescribed by the Jewish law as types of far higher and more important mysteries. You will then be enabled to illustrate those portions of Scripture which are so closely connected with the sublime and exalted Degree of the Most Holy Royal Arch in which we have been engaged.'

Conclusion

Most of our masonic ritual is very old and no doubt had very simple 'oral only' origins. It has suffered additions and variations over hundreds of years caused by the vagaries and frailties of human memory and the limits of early level of knowledge and understanding.

It appears that the Breastplate (and possibly its symbolism) did figure more significantly in the ceremonies of the older Chapters than of our Chapters today (vide Bernard Jones) but over the centuries has become the subject of disjointed and incomplete reference.



The High Priest wearing a Breastplate as described in the Volume of the Sacred Law.