There are many theories of origin for the Cryptic degrees of the York Rite system of Freemasonry, just as there are differing views from whence came the degrees of Craft Masonry. But unlike the first three degrees of the lodge system, where the most popular theories claim some tie to one or more operative institutions of the Middle Ages, most Masonic scholars attribute the origin of the so-called higher degrees to one or more centers of influence which originated after the organization of the premier Grand Lodge in 1717.

And, in things Masonic, the most popular center of influence was France. Certainly, the rapid spread of Masonry on the continent during the 50 year period immediately following the beginning of speculative Masonry, centered in France. The legend of Hiram and the symbolic association with the building of King Solomon’s Temple captured the imagination of symbolists of the 18th Century. Fraternal writers began zealously popularizing the newly organized fraternity with a multiplication of Masonic degrees. Perhaps the leading authorship of many of these higher degrees can be attributed to one Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay, who, in 1737, as Grand Orator of the Grand Lodge of France, delivered a famous oration which launched a proliferation of several hundred degrees in France. One of these was a form of the Royal Arch degree, with several others being of a Cryptic nature in which the germ of our Cryptic degrees today were most likely developed. The Royal Master is old to the system. The sign and pass of a Royal Master appears as early as 1740 in an English ritual which was translated from a French original.

Writers are divided as to whether the English or French version of the Royal Arch is older, but the main theme in both, namely the recovery of the Lost Word, has been attributed to Ramsey. Scottish, or Ecossais Masonry, came into being as the result of Ramsey’s oration, and, in this system, there are indeed numerous degrees which detail a method of preserving the true Word.

In the Ecossais system there is a legend to the effect that the builder of the Temple engraved a word upon a triangle of pure metal, and, fearing that it might be lost, he always bore it about his person, suspended from his neck, with the engraving side next to his breast. In time of great peril to himself, he cast it into an old dry well, which was in the southeast corner of the temple, where it was afterward found by three Masters. In later versions of the legend, it is said the word was deposited by the builder in a place which he had particularly prepared for it. And, in yet another version of the French ritual, an important job is assigned to a friend of Hiram Abiff, who becomes a central character in this degree; namely, Adoniram. And thus we find the theme of the Royal Master’s Degree.

The first appearance of the degree in this country is in the Columbian Council of Royal Masters of New York, organized in 1810, although there is some evidence that Royal Masters were in existence prior to 1807, and the degree was worked as a side degree of the Scottish Rite, or as the first in a system of Sublime degrees which included both York and Scottish Rite degrees. It was worked as a separate degree from Select Master until 1818, when the popular Blue Lodge ritualist, Jeremy Cross, combined the two under the rubric of Royal and Select Masters and published them in his True Masonic Chart.
Of course, the Royal Master Degree is the first of the two mandatory degrees of the Council of Cryptic Masons. As we know, the legend relates to events which occurred during the construction of the first, or Solomon’s, temple. The first section takes place just before the death of H.A and the second section occurs immediately after the tragedy and before his body is recovered. The ceremonies of the degree of Royal Master are very brief and simple, yet convey a powerfully symbolic idea.

In the Royal Degree, we find the introduction of a new character in Masonry--Adoniram. It is important to know that this figure is confined to the period of the construction of the first temple, and figures symbolically in a series of degrees known as Adoniramite Masonry. The legends and traditions which surround Adoniram derive from one passage of scripture, I Kings 6, v. 14, where Solomon refers to him as the superintendent over the laborers at Mount Lebanon. In fact, he has been called the “first of the Fellowcrafts.”

In Cryptic Masonry, he is the one whom the three Grand Masters had intended first to communicate that knowledge which they had reserved as a fitting reward to be bestowed upon all the deserving craftsmen at the completion of the temple. It is significant to note that Adoniram is the one who is seeking to obtain the *Word*. He makes inquiry of the Master Hiram as to how the *Word* may be received in the event one of the kings dies before it is revealed. This inquiry is followed by three powerful and beautiful lessons on death, each lesson ending with H.A. pointing at the base of the altar with the words; “It will be buried there.” While the *Word* is not revealed by Hiram, he suggests that plans had, in fact, been made to preserve the *Word* by covering it in a secret place within the temple, Adoniram is given the clue as to where he should look, and, informing King Solomon of his conversation with Hiram, the King places the *Word* in a secret vault and invests Adoniram with a substitute.

The first section, thus, symbolizes that every man must labor on his own spiritual temple. The work of gaining divine knowledge is labor of the earth. The burial of the lost Word signifies that man cannot ever know all Truth while he makes his earthly sojourn, regardless of the path of faith and reason he takes. And, even when he knows where to look for Truth, he can only receive a substitute or portion of it during his earthly life. He must come to the Divine Master to receive his reward. His earthly labor cannot be consummated except by the acquisition of divine Truth. Such a reward will always remain partially covered in this life, for the temple he is building is the temple of this life; and that temple must be destroyed by death and a second temple of a future life built upon its foundation. In our first temple, or life, the truth cannot be found. We must be content with its substitute.

The second section of the degree commences with the candidate being conducted eight times about the lodge, receiving the scriptures of I Kings, chapters 6 and 7, relating to how the temple was furnished and decorated. The scripture concludes with readings from the Book of Revelation, Chapter 20, in which the author identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. The candidate is then conducted to the altar and is obligated and given the steps, signs, grip and word. The work is concluded with a lecture detailing the furniture of the temple, with a detailed description of the Ark of the Covenant.

The second section represents that brief period of time after the death of the Builder, between the discovery of his body and his Masonic interment. Our friend, Adoniram, is offered the role of Hiram, and does, himself, become the substitute for divine Truth. He is received under the wings of the Cherubim. In biblical symbolism, the cherubim represent the majesty and ruling power of God, as well as His divine attributes. In the Royal Master’s degree, they stand for the truth of God’s Being, that divine spark which must always be present in the holies of holies.
within us. We are told that the Cherubim spread their wings over the place of the Ark of the Covenant, and cover it. Thus, we each have this holy place within. No matter how weak we may become, or how often we err, the spirit of God is not far away from our conscious mind.

We are but a substitute for the revealed life. When we unite with the true Word, or sacred life, through spiritual thought, study, and prayer, the Word is made flesh and we begin to conform to the idea of the Divine Will, corresponding to perfect thought and perfect action.

Such is the transition of the Royal Master to a divine being. He who comes to ask and seek Truth, must begin by placing himself beneath the extended wings of the Cherubim, which is the protection of Divine Power, who alone is Truth, and from whom alone, Truth can be obtained.

**The Select Master Degree and the Sacred Vault Tradition of Freemasonry**

The Select Master is another of series of degrees in Masonry known as the Secret Vault degrees. It was reportedly brought to America by Stephen Morin about 1762 as a side degree of the Lodge of Perfection. It is of French or German origin and was conferred on Masons of the Royal Arch of Solomon in the Scottish Rite system and Royal Arch Masons in the York Rite system. In its history, the degree has been conferred by Grand Councils, Grand Chapters, Lodges of Perfection, Council Princes of Rose Croix, and Supreme Councils of the Scottish Rite. The degree was no originally worked as a partner with the Royal Master’s Degree.

The historical object of the degree is to commemorate the deposit if an important secret or treasure which was said to have been made by Hiram Abif. The place of meeting is a secret vault under the temple. The Secret Master represents the culmination of what has been styled Ancient Craft Masonry.

In this degree the events which resulted in the preservation of the True Word of a Master Mason are explained. It’s interesting to note that the events in the legend occurred during the construction of Solomon’s Temple, but before Hiram Abif’s death. We will recall that the Royal Master’s Degree depicts the period of time between the death of Hiram and the completion of the Temple. Hence, the chronological order appears to be reversed in the Council degrees. This apparent misdating is clarified by the explanation that the secrets of the Select Master were secret, even to the craft and not brought to light until long after the Royal Master’s degree had been known. In other words, the Secret Masters were workmen on the temple who were doing their secret work without ever being openly recognized as a separate group of temple workers. Their job and their existence were unknown in the first temple. In fact, according to legend, the incidents revealed in the Select Master were not supposed to be revealed until the building of the second temple by Zerubbabel. Hence, the Royal Master’s Degree is always conferred before that of the Select Master.

The two virtues taught in the Degree are secrecy and silence. These are called the cardinal virtues of a Select Master because these two particular virtues are foundational to the secret tradition. The same principles of secrecy and silence existed in all the ancient mystery traditions. The esoteric meaning here is that Select Masters work in secrecy and silence that they may prepare and preserve the sacred deposits of Truth until such time as these may be revealed, or come into full revelation. From the perspective of faith, the idea is that the work which men do now is not for the present alone. Their labors should be such that, when their work in the present life is finished, the Grand Architect will reward them in the second temple of eternal life.
The essential teaching of the degree has to do with the path one must take to earn such a reward. And that takes us to the Secret Vault Tradition in Freemasonry.

We make numerous references to the mystic center, or secret chamber, in Freemasonry. We first encounter it in the Fellowcraft Degree, with our journey to the middle chamber. But we are not told what we were to find there. In the Master Mason Degree we are searching for the lost secrets and we know they are to be found in the sanctum sanctorum, or a sacred center, but again we can’t find the center because we are not told where to look. Yet, the center of which we speak is the same place for both the FC and the MM. In Craft Masonry, this center is presumed to be the point within the circle. And it is the same center by means of which we hope to find the Vault and its precious content in the Chapter and Council degrees. It is the same center in which is a sacred treasure is revealed within in the Royal Arch, or Holy of Holies, or center of consecrated sacredness. But it remains unknown because it is an Ineffable idea. It is the True Word, but a journey must still be made to in order to erect the second temple from the ruins of the first, which is no less than a journey representing the rebirth of the human race: what the Kabbalists call the“Self-Revelation of God.”

Thus it is the passage or journey that must have the most meaning to us. It is the passage through the nine arches, where each arch or cavern contains the attributes of God which we must integrate into our own soul. In the French ritual, these are the nine sephiroth of the Kabbalah.

In the Cryptic Degrees, the vault symbolizes the human search for the essential reality and attributes of God. The Mason, like the Select Master, must have access to the knowledge of the Divine Truth only be seeking ever deeper within his inmost Self, his Soul, which is the divine tool given to Man’s nature for the purpose of God Realization. In Masonry, all circular symbols like the point within the circle, the vaulted ceiling, the arch, indeed, the number 3 itself, refers to a divine level of consciousness.

The journey through the nine arches is both a descent and an ascent at the same time. We must descend into the center of our own being in order to discover that divine spirit within us wherein we will behold God in the mirror of existence—and there will be then, as there was in the beginning—only God.