



THE FIRST DEGREE & THE ANCIENT  
MYSTERIES.

The object of this exercise is to show that our Masonic ritual contains traces of extreme antiquity—that there is abundant evidence in it to show that it is related to the Ancient Mysteries going back(~~to~~) at least to the 6th Century B.C.

I must to-night confine myself to a consideration of the First Degree because there are brethren here who are Entered Apprentices, and I must not mention anything which they will learn in subsequent degrees.

Before I come to say anything about the Ancient Mysteries I must remind you where our First Degree comes from

I have no doubt whatever that it is mainly based on the formal ceremony by which a teen-ager in the Middle Ages in England was admitted as an Apprentice to the Masons' trade.

The word "Apprentice" as you probably know, is derived from the Latin verb meaning "to learn". The young fellow had to learn his work so that ultimately he could practice his trade. This apprenticeship lasted seven years.

Our ritual itself contains proof of it's derivation from the Operative Masonry e.g. as we say in presenting the working tools "we are not all operative masons, but rather free and accepted or speculative....."

Again, Operative Masons are referred to in the Lecture on the First Tracing Board and again in the official lectures (Lecture 1; section 7).

What this medieval ceremony was I have been at very great pains to discover. I thought I might get a line on it by finding out if there are any Operative Masons Lodges working in England to-day and studying their ritual.

I tried first of all The Worshipful Company of Masons in London and was told that they had nothing to do with Freemasonry. I also tried the Librarian of Grand Lodge. He said that he had heard that there were a number of Lodges of Operative Masons functioning but he did not know anything about them, or where they were.

I then wrote to the Secretary of the Prov. Grand Lodge of E. Lancashire whom I had heard of as a Masonic writer. He did not personally know anything of them but said that he had heard of an Operative Lodge working at Channel Row, Westminster, so I was able to get into touch with a member of that Lodge who lives at Barnstaple.

(read Oliver's letter)

I next tried the Secretary of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research No.2076. of which I am a member. He said -(quote) "Lodges of Operative Masonry do exist (at least so I am told) but they are not easy to find"

Finally, through W.Br.St.George (Local Secretary of the Correspondance Circle of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge) I got into touch with the Editor of The Masonic Record who in turn passed me on to Brother Elvin (2nd. G.M.M.-in-charge) of The Worshipful Society of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Glazers, Paviers, Plaisterers and Bricklayers. This Grand Assemblage is the Grand Lodge (as it ~~was~~) of the Operative Masons. (The meetings of these masons are called "Assemblages" not "Lodges") from whom I got the low-down on Operative Masonry in England at the present time. I will read the relevant parts of his letter.

(Read Elvin's letter)

These Assemblages are really bodies of Masons interested in research into the masonic Trade Guilds of the Middle Ages. From a study of their proceedings and from a study of the 80 Old Regulations and Charges which have come down to us --some of them are to be found in our own Masonic Library--- I can now give you a fairly accurate account of the procedure by which a young man was made an apprentice to the Masons' trade in the Middle Ages in England.

The usual age for an Apprentice was 14 or 15 years. You will notice that his admission corresponds in many particulars to our own First Degree Ceremony of Initiation. First he had to apply for admission of "his own free will and accord". He had to stand on three occasions at a place where the Masons, as they were going to work, could see him. If any of them knew anything against him they had to report it and it was investigated.

He had to state that he was the son of a "free" man and humbly craved to be made an Apprentice. He further had to declare that he was prompted by a favourable opinion pre-conceived of the Order and the desire for knowledge to enable him to work at the Trade. And lastly, he had to promise and swear that he would conform to the usages and customs of the Trade.

The fact that the applicant had to state that he was a free man shows that the origin of this goes back to a time when all men were not free. As a matter of fact, slavery practically died out in England after the Wars of the Roses, 1399-1488; but remnants of it are to be found in the latter half of the XVIth. Century.

The candidate had to be proposed by one Mason, and seconded by another and supported by five others. If he was accepted he was ordered to go to the Porch - a room with two doors adjoining the Lodge Room at Noon (they called it High Twelve in those days) on a certain Friday (the sixth day of the week).

Here he was divested of any metals he had on him - this would include his money- and hoodwinked.

\* I approached Br. Elvin & eventually passed the information he (Elvin) supplied to the Canon. *W. St. George*

He was then divested of all his clothes and was dirted with mud.

A surgeon then arrived and removed the hoodwink. He was told "to wash and be clean". The bath was made ready and he had to dip in it seven times.

The surgeon then examined him to see if he was sound in mind and limb and reported him as "perfect in all his parts".

He was then hoodwinked again and clothed in a white cloak. He was clothed in a white cloak to show that he was a Candidate.

The word "candidate" comes from the Latin adjective "candidus" which means "white". Then a cord was looped round his neck to show that he was to be bound an apprentice.

He was allowed to enter the Lodge and had to take an oath that he would not reveal any part of the ceremony in the event of his being rejected at any subsequent stage in the proceedings.

He then perambulated round the Lodge to show the Masons that he was properly prepared to be made an apprentice. (The word "apprentice" is the Latin word for a learner)

He then knelt with his right hand on the Bible and recited a very serious obligation to keep secret anything which he would hear afterwards in the ceremony. During his Obligation he was asked "What punishment is inflicted upon those who reveal ye secret? Your heart is to be taken out of your body, your head is to be cut off from your body and buried in the seamark and not in any place where Christians are buried"

There is no doubt that in ancient times it was contemplated that these terrible penalties would actually be inflicted. At that time, physical mutilation such as the amputation of a hand and hanging, drawing and quartering were still on the Statute Books of this Country.

After the obligation the candidate had to "seal" it with his lips on the Bible. As his lips were brought to the Book a large piece of soft wax was placed underneath them, and his head was forcibly pressed down so that an actual impression of his lips was made on the wax. His obligation was "Sealed with his lips" actually and literally. In our ceremony of the First Degree the Junior Deacon lays his hand gently on the candidate's head- our ritual says "to prevent him seeing anything of the V.O.T.S.L. But in the ancient ceremonies it was the Master who did it to ensure that the candidate's obligation was literally and actually "sealed" with his lips.

The Master then said "Rise- Apprentice to the craft of Free Mason". The candidate was then presented with his working tools and was invested with the Apprentice's Apron.

Apprenticeship lasted seven years, during which time he wore his neck-cord as a sign that he was still bound as an Apprentice.

At the end of seven years he applied to be made free of his bond and the cord was removed.

I hope I have said enough to convince you that our ritual is largely based on the ceremonies of the Operative Masons in the Middle Ages.

But as time went on other men who were not operative masons were allowed to join the Order. They were, as we say, "accepted!" These were a class of people very different from the Operative Masons and included men of considerable education, many of them first-rate philosophers who looked for a spiritual meaning beneath the words of the Operative Mason's ritual. We call them "speculative masons".

They looked for a hidden meaning beneath the words of the ritual. They wished to "apply the working mason's tools to their morals".

It was they who were responsible for the introduction of the Prayer which you and I heard when we were first admitted into Freemasonry, that the Almighty Father would endue us with a competency of Divine Wisdom, that assisted by the secrets of our masonic art we might be enabled to unfold the beauties of true godliness to the honour and glory of God's Holy Name.

It was they who exhorted us to make a study of this progressive science and make a daily advancement in masonic knowledge.

Now let us consider the Ancient Mysteries. They were introduced by those "speculative" masons to whom I referred a few moments ago. The First Book of Constitutions is the original one which Dr. Anderson was commissioned to draw up "to order and arrange the ancient constitutions upon a new and better system".

Our ritual is shot through and through with traces of the most Ancient Mysteries in the world- Egyptian, Chaldean, Pythagorean, Orphic, Platonist, Mythraic and Attic. How these numerous references to the Ancient Mysteries got into our ritual is not a matter of speculation.

Thus it is true to say that Masonry is directly linked with that which goes back to time immemorial, before either the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle were ever thought of.

It is worthwhile thinking about these Ancient Mysteries before I ask you to notice some of the references to them in our ritual.

They were intended for men who were dissatisfied with their own earthly nature with all its base desires and appetites, and who wished for a transformation, a regeneration of their nature and in order to secure this were prepared to submit themselves to a very strict discipline.

They were meant for those who were ready to concentrate their energies on the higher side of their nature; who wished to rise above their natural life and live a super-sensitive life. The work of the Ancient Mysteries was a far more serious business than merely passing candidates through a series of formal rites as we do to-day.

The enormous amount of Initiation literature available to us shows how drastic and searching was the discipline to which candidates were subjected under the expert guidance of Masters who had previously undergone the same discipline and were competent to guide their juniors.

The whole point of the Mysteries (and I may add this applies also to Masonry) was that the candidate had to find out for himself the hidden meaning of the numerous signs and symbols to which he was introduced at his initiation.

The interpretation of what he saw was not communicated to him, its meaning was not handed to him on a plate; he had to find it out by his own reflection and contemplation. To help him he had at hand Past Masters of the Art, always ready to guide him in his search.

You can see a reference to this in our own ritual, where Masonry is referred to as a "noble science" and a "royal art".

Now let me put before you a very brief account of the Ancient Mysteries (I must remind you in passing that some of these Ancient Mysteries degenerated into mere formalities and in some cases even to abominable tyranny, black magic, fearful mental tortures ending sometimes in death). I hope you will be on the look out for any traces of them in our own 1st. Degree

In the Ancient Mysteries the desire to be initiated had to come from the candidate himself. He had to indicate that he was not satisfied with his present condition, and earnestly desired to be led into a higher way of life. He had to state that he had a yearning desire to pass from his present state of spiritual blindness to a state of supernatural light; to have his old imperfect nature spiritualised, transformed, and revolutionised.

The oldest prayer in the world, and the one still used in the East by those seeking initiation into the Mysteries consisted of six words in Sanscrit and can be translated into English thus:-

"From the unreal lead me to the real.  
From darkness lead me to light.  
From the mortal lead me to immortality"

He had to ask for initiation, it was entirely, as we should say "of his own free-will and accord". And the Masters of the Art had to be satisfied from the tone of his voice that he was absolutely sincere. His voice had to "ring true", giving back a good report as when a coin is tapped or dropped to the ground to test its genuineness.

The very tone of his voice revealed his own spirituality. In the Egyptian mysteries one of the titles accorded to the Initiate was "True of Voice".

We say of the Initiate "the tongue of good report has been heard in his favour". There is a trace here of the Ancient Mysteries.

Those who sought the higher life had to be ready to divest themselves of money and metals and all that they stand for, in order to concentrate their energies on the development of the higher principles of their nature.

When we were initiated into Masonry we were told that if we had any money or metallic substance about us the ceremony up to that point would have to be repeated. The reasons given in the Lectures are threefold; no weapons must be brought into the Lodge; we are taught in a dramatic way the virtue of charity; and finally that no metals were used in the building of King Solomon's Temple.

But if you look at the Ancient Mysteries you will find other reasons. In the Stone Age, that is before the Iron Age, metals were regarded as being polluting and corrupting to anyone who touched them. Indeed in the Stone Age, if a man accidentally touched anything metallic, he was regarded as unclean and immediately, as a prophylactic, had to touch some non-metallic substance, such as flesh or wood. This is the origin of the expression "touch wood", which is one of the oldest superstitions in the world.

In the Mysteries the idea of the Initiate being divested of metallic substances was that he had to present himself pure and undefiled into a religious society. The application of all this must be obvious to all Freemasons to-day.

The hoodwinking of the Initiate in the Ancient Mysteries and indeed in Masonry, is symbolically to indicate a state of darkness- the darkness of ignorance in which the Initiate is, before he is admitted to the light- the light of revelation.

The blindfolding of the candidate was a very common piece of symbolism in all the ancient rites of initiation. And in Freemasonry, when the candidate declares that the predominant wish of his heart is to receive the blessing of light, he is metaphorically expressing his earnest desire to be enlightened by heavenly wisdom, in order that the darkness of his ignorance may be dispelled and that he may be enabled to unfold the beauties of true godliness.

The reasons for the right arm, left breast and knee being made bare also have their origins in the ancient Mysteries. In those Mysteries the sacred paths were taken kneeling on the Cubic Stone or stone altar.

The arm and knee were made bare so that there should be nothing between the human body and the sacred altar stone. That custom is as old as the hills; but in Freemasonry the initiate is ordered to place his bare hand on the V.O.S.L., signifying that nothing is to come between him and God.

The breast is made bare during our Initiation and here again you see exactly the same thing in the ancient ceremonies. In those far off days as in our own times members of the opposite sex attempted to enter the secret societies. Baring of the breast was a safeguard against this. Indeed, in the old mysteries the candidate often was required to enter completely naked or nearly so. It not only was a test of sex but was the symbol of a state of complete indigence.

At a Lodge in the North of England in the 18th. century we read that the candidate was clothed in a long tunic, tied loosely at the waist and with a hood attached. Blindfolding was effected by drawing the hood over the face. On entering the Lodge the gown was thrown open, not only to enable the Master personally to identify the sex, but to enable him to make examination of the state of the candidate's hands and feet, as anyone so deformed as to be unable to earn his living as an Operative Mason was ineligible for initiation as a Mason. The candidate was sometimes led round the room in a state of complete nudity.

The Postulant's right heel was slip-shod. This again has its origin in the far distant past. It used to remind the candidate that he was on holy ground. Moses was (~~was~~) commanded to take off his shoes when he was at the burning bush in the presence of the Almighty. In the East to-day shoes are always removed when the worshipper enters a sacred building.

The cable tow about the neck is explained by the Worshipful Master as a means of preventing any attempt at retreat. This is only a secondary and incidental reason. In the middle ages the apprentice wore a neckcord to distinguish him from a craftsman, and when his apprenticeship ended



there was a ceremony for removing it. In the Ancient Rites the neck cord was an indication of a humble spirit in the person seeking light.

Humility is an essential qualification in every Freemason. You may remember that on a famous historical occasion in 1347 the burghers of Calais appeared before Edward III with halters about their necks as a sign of their humility and submission.

In the Ancient Mysteries the neck cord had an even deeper significance. It taught the beginner symbolically that he who has once felt the desire for the Higher Life should never recede from his quest and indeed to do so was the equivalent of moral suicide. At the same time he must not be precipitate. He must not rashly and ignorantly rush forward to grasp the secrets of his own higher nature but proceed humbly, cautiously and meekly under instructed guidance.

The great science of rising to the higher life will unfold itself more and more, little by little, gradually, as it is diligently studied by the seeker after truth.

If my time and your patience permitted one could go on almost indefinitely pointing out places in our ritual of the Ancient Mysteries. But I hope I have given you sufficient examples to show you what Speculative Masonry really means.

As I said, all are not interested in it. Personally, I have no desire to alienate any Brother's interest in the Craft by imposing a standard beyond his present capacity and desire. Yet I feel that provision should be made for those Brethren who wish to plumb the depths of Masonry, so that it may become for them as indeed it has become for many - one of the chief blessings of their lives; that it may fulfill for them the ancient prayer which I quoted earlier in this paper:-

"From the unreal, lead me to the Real.  
From darkness lead me to the Light.  
From the mortal, bring me to Immortality"

and that in Masonry they may find a ladder set up uniting their Lodge with the Grand Lodge above, that they may exclaim with the Hebrew Patriarch (as we in 280 always sing):-

"SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE, AND  
I KNEW IT NOT"