

"WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?"

by

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Every E.A., before being passed to the degree of a F.C., is asked "What is Freemasonry?" and his reply is based upon the statement made 150 years ago by Mr. Hemming who said that Speculative Masonry was a system veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

As regards those symbols, Brethren should be careful not to overlook them where they are to be found, and they must be equally careful not to find them where they do not exist, for the Egyptians by introducing numerous mysteries where there were none, disfigured the simple purity of their early religion.

There are many different conceptions about Freemasonry and its real object. Some brethren think that it is explained in the beautiful words of the ritual; others regard it simply as a world-wide Brotherhood, perhaps the greatest brotherhood the world has ever known, whilst many others, including the outside world, believe that its main purpose lies in its charities. But however laudable these conceptions may be, none of them is Freemasonry, even though they are all associated with its main purpose, for the great objective of Freemasonry is to provide and impart spiritual knowledge.

This is the reason why it is veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, for the late Dr. Sayce, the distinguished Professor of Assyriology and one of those appointed by Parliament for the revision of the Old Testament, has said in one of his numerous works that "we can understand the spiritual and the abstract only by the help of the material, and we cannot convey that understanding to others, or even to ourselves, without recourse to parables, symbols and allegory", and Dr. Sayce was only repeating what had been said 1,800 years ago by Clemens Alexandrinus in his "Stromata" when he wrote "All sacred truth is enfolded in enigmatical legends, fables and allegories."

Then Plato, the giant of all philosophers, has described Man as part angel and part beast, and said "If Man does not aspire to the angel he will descend to the level of the beast", and the fundamental purpose of Freemasonry is to create an aspiration to the angel and to guide a Brother safely through the intricate windings of this mortal life.

No finer tribute to Masonry has ever been paid than that contained in the message of 5th November 1951 from our beloved late P.G.M. King George VI, to the Earl of Scarbrough on the eve of our present G.M's Installation, when His Majesty said:

"The world today does require spiritual and moral regeneration. I have no doubt, after many years as a member of our Order, that Freemasonry can play a most important part in that vital need."

Consideration given to those words of our late Royal Brother should create in each of us a desire to fathom the depths of the spiritual teaching of Masonry, but this will not be achieved without some difficulty, and if investigation is confined to the words of the ritual only a partial explanation of the teaching will be obtained. The ritual is itself in many respects allegorical, but it is supplemented by symbols and underlying each symbol there is embodied some profound spiritual truth. In addition there are actions made during the ceremonies and those actions have also a spiritual significance. This method of teaching corresponds closely to that of the ancient Egyptians, who held that for religious instruction words should always be accompanied by actions, so that sound and sight might mutually assist each other in making a lasting impression on the minds of the listeners.

But the late Sir Wallis Budge, the world renowned Egyptologist, has left a striking comment on the actions of the Egyptians, for he said that "eventually meanings of the actions were forgotten in many cases but repetition of the actions never ceased." Budge's comment can be taken as a warning to Freemasons, for there appears to be an increasing tendency to make Masonic actions automatically without giving a thought to what they indicate; and if this continues there will be a danger of oblivion of the meaning of Masonic actions.

This danger would be avoided if Brethren would consider in retrospect every thing they have seen and heard since they first became Masons, and the more they concentrated on the meaning of symbols and actions the greater would become their appreciation of Freemasonry and the greater their amazement as they realised the profundity of its teaching and its application to the dual nature of man.

Such retrospection might well commence with the entry into the Ante-room of the Lodge of the candidate for Initiation.

The first object to attract his attention would probably be the Tyler's sword which he would regard as an offensive weapon. But the sword in Masonry is not a weapon of offence but solely of defence. In former times Brethren wore swords and when a candidate during the ceremony of Initiation was restored to light he found himself facing the naked swords of the Brethren, but the Master immediately told him that the circle of swords was not meant to intimidate him, but to assure him that in case of need every Brother's sword would leap from its scabbard in his defence.

A Brother would also probably hear that the sword symbolically teaches us to set a watch at the entrance of our thoughts, place a guard at the door of our lips and post a sentinel at the avenue of our actions. If he truly assimilates that symbolism then, whenever he sees the Tyler's sword before entering the Lodge room, it should be to him a silent Monitor, warning him to leave behind all profane and worldly thoughts on entering the sacred temple. Perhaps also his thoughts will turn to the flaming sword of Eden, to prevent the entrance of sinful man or anything evil.

When the Candidate presents himself for initiation he may not know that this is only the first of three degrees of the Craft, and that the ceremony in each degree is intended to mark a progressive stage in a spiritual journey. These three stages denote "Purification", "Illumination", and "Unification".

The Initiation Ceremony indicates "Purification", liberation from the delusion of the senses, and from spiritual darkness typified by the hoodwink.

The very first part of his preparation for the ceremony is typical of Purification, for he is divested of earthly riches - to seek for heavenly treasure - but this is given a material meaning in the ceremony

There is however a veiled reference to earthly riches just before a candidate for the third degree undergoes a figurative death, when the S.W. at the end of his examination says: "Pass T.C." i.e., "Pass, worldly possessions."

The significance of the next part of his preparation was well expressed in the old Lectures:-

" My l... was bared as a token of sincerity.
 " My k... was bared as a token of humility.
 " I was s... as a token of Reverence and Fidelity,
 " and I was led through the darkness down the N.
 " towards the Light in the E., and the light shineth
 " in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not."

In those days the Bible, now called the V.S.L., was always opened at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John, which commences with an ancient quotation adopted by St. John as a prologue, and that prologue ends with the words: "And the Light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not."

That light is not the shining light at the right of the W.M. but is to be found in the first sentence of the Gospel according to St. John.

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Later, after restoration to material light, the Candidate was requested to examine the open Bible, to assure himself that it was the book of his faith on which he had taken his ob....., and the first words he would read would be "In the beginning was the WORD."

Although the V.S.L. is now opened at the 7th Chapter of I Kings, instead of at St. John's Gospel, yet every Brother should realise that the Mason Word, which he expected to receive after being made a Mason, is to be found at the end of the first sentence of the prologue - "In the beginning was the Word." This is the true word of a Speculative Mason. It has come down from the distant ages and has always retained its original meaning - The Law of God.

Finding the Word is to find the key to the Masonic teaching, and the possession of this precious treasure should stimulate Brethren to further exertion, and to arrive at a better understanding of Freemasonry, and the depth of its teaching.

But a Brother who has found this key is not expected to be always of a serious demeanour. Freemasonry recognises that man cannot live continuously on the spiritual plane, and so it has provided sociability and innocent enjoyment at the after proceedings. Reverence and enjoyment must go together so that all may go well and thus complete the grand design of being happy and communicating happiness.

An Initiate may perceive this combination of Reverence and Happiness on his first evening at the table, but, unless he is given an explanation of the Craft Fire, he will not realise its meaning, not the connexion between the last part of the Fire and the Initiation ceremony in the Lodge.

For when the Tyler had completed the preparation of the candidate he then gave three distinct ks.. on the door of the Lodge. Those K...s have a spiritual significance which is explained in the 1st Lecture :-

"Ask, and it shall be given you.

"Seek, and ye shall find.

"Knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

After he has entered the Lodge room, the candidate himself makes those three k...s, first on the shoulder of the J.W., and again on the shoulder on the S.W. - three times three in all - and he will subsequently hear a repetition of this triple triad of k...s in the 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, at the end of the Craft Fire.

Some 200 years ago the three k...s given by the Tyler were regarded as referring also to the Trinity, and at that time the triune essence of the Deity was visibly symbolised by three Gt. Lts., in the centre of the floor of the Lodge, and arranged in the form of an equilateral triangle. Such a triangle has been preserved in only a few of the English Lodges; for about 150 years ago the V.S.L., the Sq., and the C...s were substituted, and described in the ritual as the three great though emblematical Ls. in Masonry.

That is only one of the many changes that have been made. Formerly the 2nd d... was truly a d... of "Illumination", a discernment of the realities, climbing out of earthly shadows into spiritual light, and in that Illumination the triangle of Ls. played an important part. It is not so today; for now when an E.A. is made a F.C. he advances by five st...s as though ascending a winding staircase, whereas formerly he actually climbed five semi-circular st...s, so that from the summit he could observe clearly the triangle of Ls. on the floor of the Lodge. We still have a reminder of that old procedure, for in the closing of a F.C.'s Lodge the wording of the former ritual has been retained:

"In this position what have you discovered?"

"The sacred symbol."

"Where is it situated?"

"In the centre of the Lodge."

"To whom does it allude?"

"To God."

The equilateral triangle was then, and has continued to be, the most sacred of all Masonic symbols, for being the symbol of perfection of things spiritual, it can refer only to God. Spiritual perfection is not given to man, perfect holiness belongeth only to the Lord.

Although Speculative Masonry differs from Operative Masonry both carry the designation "Free" and many reasons have been advanced as to why this word "Free" was used by the Operatives. Whatever the reason for the adoption of this word by the Operatives may have been originally, it has now acquired a new and wider significance amongst Free and Accepted Masons, for every Brother is now free to retain his own particular religion.

This was not always the case, and until two centuries ago a candidate for Freemasonry was required to be of the Christian religion and to declare a specific belief in the Trinity; but, following the union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, Masonry definitely ceased to be a Christian Order. A candidate is not now asked any questions about his own particular religion and the only question of a religious nature put to him is asked at the commencement of his Initiation:- "In whom do you put your

trust?" the reply to which is the all-embracing answer "In God;" and as a ^{speculative} Mason he is "free" to interpret Masonic symbols, allegory and actions according to his own conception of their spiritual meaning.

He will soon realise that the Sq... is the most prominent symbol of the Craft, and later he may hear it described as the acknowledged symbol of strength and criterion of perfection; but the perfection is material, for spiritual perfection is represented by the equilateral triangle. Only one triangle is seen in the Craft Lodge, and it is on the Chaplain's Jewel - for the duties of the Chaplain are wholly spiritual. But though no triangle appears on the Jewels of other Officers, - except that of the M.W.G.M., - a representation of which is at the end of the Book of Constitutions, - yet many triangles are made during the ceremonies.

Thus, when a candidate kneels to receive the benefit of Masonic prayer, a triangle is made over his head, the wands of the Deacons being interlocked to form the sides, while the shoulders of the candidate form the base. He is under Divine protection.

A similar triangle is made during the ob., for each ob. is taken in the "presence" of God, whether designated as the G.A., the G.G., or the M.H. But, after taking the ob. of a M.M., and after he has been raised from a figurative death, the candidate himself makes the triangle without the aid of the Deacons' wands. This occurs in the Sn. of J and exaltation, "All Glory to the M.H."; and while making a triangle with his arms the Candidate should also make a smaller triangle within it, using his th...s and first f....s for that purpose, and, at the same time, he is wearing his M.M.'s apron on which is another triangle.

The apron of a Speculative Mason is, in itself, an indication of the dual nature of the speculative teaching, for it has a square base and a triangular flap. The apron of an Operative Mason was very different, for it was a long garment with a square flap. When an Operative apprentice was made a fellow or master of the Craft the square flap was turned down, for it was no longer needed to protect his chest. This is probably the reason why some Brethren have the idea that the flap of a Speculative Mason's apron should not be turned down until he becomes a F.C. But the changes in the Speculative apron have a spiritual meaning, not a material reason, and the flap is turned down when he is first invested with the badge of a Mason, to indicate the descent of the spiritual into the material. Then, when he is made a F.C. to mark the progress he has made, two rosettes are added to the apron, but he will not realise, at that time, that they are intended to form the base of a triangle which will be completed by the addition of a third rosette when he is raised to the degree of a M.M.

The third degree is well called the "sublime" d. of a M.M. for this is the third stage of his spiritual journey in the Craft. It is the most spiritual of the Craft degrees for it is "Unification", returning to God. It is in this degree that reference is first made to the centre, a point from which a Mason cannot err, for the centre refers to God, and recovering on the centre is an allusion to that divine spark, emanating from the Diety, which resides in every Mason.

A Mason should have an additional incentive to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge on the realisation that Masonic symbols, with the exception of the equilateral triangle, have generally at least two meanings, one being material and the other spiritual. Sometimes the symbols have several meanings, for instance the cable tow of the Initiate. In English Freemasonry only the material meaning of the c.t. is given - to render any attempt at retreat fatal - but in another jurisdiction it is given a spiritual - the bondage of sin - and after light has been restored the Master removes the c.t. from the neck of the candidate, casts it on the floor of the Lodge and says "You are now freed from bondage".

If we turn to the V.S.L. we find another meaning of the c.t. - humility and submission - for the defeated Assyrian King sent his servants in this manner to the victorious Israelitish King to express humble subjection.

In India it denotes re-birth, and even today the Hindu child, wearing the c.t. as umbilical cord, is passed between the legs of the sacred cow as a symbol of mystic re-birth.

Then in ancient Egypt in the days of their monotheistic religion, a chain or rope round the neck of a candidate for the priesthood indicated connection with and guidance from God, and it is interesting to note that the ancient Druids, when going to worship, carried a chain in the hand to denote connection with Heaven.

But retrospection on Masonic symbols and actions can be never ending, but the more the consideration given to them the greater will be the conviction that Freemasonry, first and foremost, is a spiritual Order and that its main objective is to develop the spiritual side of man.

And after such retrospection a Brother will be able to appreciate the full import of the beautiful prayer given at his Initiation, when the aid of the Diety was invoked on his behalf:

"Endue him with the competency of Thy Divine Wisdom, so that, assisted by the secrets of our Masonic Art, he may the better be enabled to unfold the beauties of true Godliness."

There is something in man which is greater than man, and to which Freemasonry calls. Freemasonry is frequently spoken of as the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, and this no doubt has arisen from two well-known Commandments:-

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind."

That is the first and the greater of the two; and the second is its natural corollary:-

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Hence the Brotherhood of Masonry, and in these two commandments lies the answer to the question "What is Freemasonry?"

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