

The Deeper Meaning of the Master Mason's Degree

(An Esoteric Interpretation of the Third Degree)

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Introduction

The following is a quote from *The Master Mason's Handbook* by J.S.M. Ward:

"The third degree in Freemasonry is termed the Sublime Degree and the title is truly justified. Even in its exoteric aspect its simple, yet dramatic, power must leave a lasting impression on the mind of every Candidate. But its esoteric meaning contains some of the most profound spiritual instruction which it is possible to obtain to-day."

The last sentence of the quote is what the substance of this lecture addresses.

The deeper esoteric meaning of Masonry, however, is a subject *not* generally taught or discussed in most Lodges. Masonic authorities have not made provision for explaining and teaching the "secrets and hidden mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry" and, for that reason, many of our brethren are left ignorant of this esoteric level of knowledge. There *are* a few who have seen the clues and have made it their personal study (which our ritual tells every Mason to do), who have tried to satisfy *the predominant wish of their heart*. There are those who are *not* interested in this aspect of Masonry, and there's nothing wrong with that because the path is not for everyone, *and it is* a hard path to follow.

It may have been taken for granted that, when a man is initiated into Masonry, he will soon appreciate its full value. In most cases, he doesn't, because Masonry, being "veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols", is a *cryptic* science and only some of our Brethren will recognize what lies hidden in our ritual.

For those who did not hear, or read, my lectures on the first two degrees, I will point out some of the clues in our rituals that indicate to us that something *is* hidden.

If our ritual was just about *moral* teachings, then consider: what are the "**secrets and hidden mysteries**"? Ask yourself what it *is* that is "**veiled in allegory**", and remember that an **allegory** is defined as "a story that has a *deeper* or more general meaning *in addition to its surface meaning*". Consider that a **symbol** is "something used for, or regarded as, *representing something else*". In the first degree, we are told that the "*usages and customs of Masonry have ever corresponded with those of the Egyptian Philosophers, to which they bear a near affinity. Unwilling to expose their mysteries to*

vulgar eyes, those philosophers concealed their particular tenets and principles under certain hieroglyphic figures and expressed their notions of government by signs and symbols”.

Having understood that something is concealed, the next step is to try and understand *what* it is that is hidden.

Our rituals encompass three aspects: physical, mental (i.e. moral and the intellectual), and spiritual. It is the *spiritual* aspect which these lectures address. Also, each degree is built on the one before, so there are three levels: 1st degree – physical also (representing birth), 2nd degree – mental (also representing growth and development), and 3rd degree – spiritual (also representing death).

As you will see from the previous lectures, and in this one, our rituals point to certain ancient mysteries which have been taught from time immemorial. These ancient mysteries (sometimes called The Secret Doctrine or The Divine Wisdom or, in modern times, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and Rosicrucianism) all teach, in a nutshell, the following: 1) the Unity of the Creator (unity meaning: there is only one, and everything is part of the One and are all therefore connected); 2) the immortality of the soul and its re-incarnation; 3) that any deed, word, or *thought* has a consequence, and 4) the necessity of understanding the former and learning to connect one’s soul to the spirit, in order to get closer to the Divine Source.

These lectures are for those who have a genuine and earnest desire for knowledge and truth, and a capacity for spiritual perception. Many men have joined Masonry for just this reason, and some have left because they never found it. **Masonry does not teach these hidden mysteries** but, in our ritual, it does allude to them, like signposts, leaving it up to the individual to seek and understand them.

It is not my aim to give you this knowledge but, through these lectures, to try to shed some light on what I have discovered and, hopefully, inspire others to go and look *behind* the veil.

In this third degree of Masonry, the exoteric and esoteric are interwoven in such an amazing way that it is almost impossible to separate the one from the other. The longer we study it, the more we realize the profound and ancient wisdom it conceals. It should inspire in us a great adventure, a mystic quest, “*to search for that which was lost*”, to comprehend the *nature* of the Universe, and of the Great Architect of the Universe, and to seek to achieve reunion with the Most High, and to find answers to the questions: “why are we here?”; “where did we come from?”; and “where are we going?”

THE OPENING

During the Opening of the lodge in the Third Degree (and I’ll remind you, from the previous lecture, that the lodge represents one’s *own* being), the Master (representing the master principle in us) is ensuring that the lodge is *properly tyled*, that is, confirming that we have shut out the rest of the world and are in the right state of preparedness to

raise ourselves to the next level, and the Senior Warden (representing our psyche, or soul) suggests that this state be tested by coming to order in the Second Degree, reminding us that we have ascended to the middle chamber of the temple and have discovered the sacred symbol that lies at the Centre (i.e., our own Centre).

WM: "Bro. J.W., are you a Master Mason?"

JW: "I am. Try me and prove me, W.S"

WM: "By what instruments of architecture will you be tried?"

JW: "By the square and compasses....which convey the abstract means and end of the science in the most clear and comprehensive manner"

The Master Principle is questioning, through his Intellect, if his spiritual nature has evolved sufficiently to control both soul and body. The reply indicates that he is prepared to be tested by both the moral code and by the spiritual laws (represented by the square and compasses).

This is then proved by coming to order in the Third Degree (entering a sublime state).

WM: "Bro. J.W., whence come you?"

JW: "From the East, W.S."

WM: "Bro. S.W, wither are you directing your course?"

SW: "Towards the West, W.S"

WM: "Bro J.W., why do you leave the East and go toward the West?"

JW: "To seek for that which was lost and which, with your assistance we hope to find, W.S"

WM: "Bro. S.W., what is that which was lost?"

SW: "The genuine secrets of a Master Mason, W.S."

As master masons, we (should) have learned that our soul and spirit (and these are two different aspects of ourselves) originates from the eternal East (this is not the geographical east, but the source of eternal Light, that is, from the very substance of the Creator) and becomes incarnate in Matter, but it brings with it a sense of loss and separation, for it has journeyed away from the Creator, and the Divine Spark within it longs to reconnect with the Divine Consciousness. In other words, we are travelling to the West, the material world, to find that lost connection and, with the assistance of our spirit, we hope to find in this world. The ritual implies that we lost something before moving to the material world. The ancient teachings tell us that it is our "god-consciousness" that was lost, and now we hope to regain that knowledge (i.e. the genuine secrets rather than the substituted ones) that will allow us to reconnect with the Divine. This can be understood better after having studied Theosophical teachings.

WM: "Bro. S.W., Where do you hope to find them?"

SW: "In the Centre, W.S"

WM: "Bro. J.W., what is a Centre?"

JW: "That point within a circle from which every part of the circumference is equidistant, W.S"

WM: "Bro. S.W., why in the Centre?"

SW: "Because that is a point from which a Master Mason cannot err, W.S."

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WM: "Brethren, I will assist you in your researches"

The Circle is an emblem of Eternity and therefore of Spirit. To the Hindus, a point *within* the circle is the symbol for the concept of the Supreme Being, from whence we have come, and to where we shall all ultimately return. The Egyptian hieroglyph for Re, the supreme god, is a dot within a circle.

A circle can only be drawn with the help of the compasses, and there is a symbolical significance to drawing it. One compass point rests at the centre, and the other point makes the infinite circle (with no beginning and no end). No matter how far the legs of the compass are extended, or how large the circle is, and even though the one point may travel through infinity, the fact remains that one point is always at the centre. So, as long as we have a connection to the centre, we cannot err. The compasses may therefore be considered as standing for the Divine Spark in Man. The soul (S.W.) indicates that it is at the centre that we hope to find the genuine secrets, and the spirit (W.M.) offers assistance with the search. Theosophical, Buddhist, and Rosicrucian teachings all indicate that we find our Spirit at the Centre of our being.

The Lodge is then opened on the Centre, and the knocks (.. .) indicate that the Spirit and Soul are now in union, the body having become less significant. True Initiation has no other objective than this conscious union between the individual soul and the Universal Divine Spirit.

ENTRANCE

The Candidate is admitted on the points of the compasses, and the significance of this is: firstly, one arm of the Compasses is on his breast, and from the point of view of the Candidate, this act, in a sense, indicates that he himself is at, or on, the Centre; secondly, the Compasses in this degree link up with, and complement, the Square used in the former degree. The significance of this has already been explained.

The Candidate now starts on his three symbolical journeys around the Lodge. His first journey, by the salute of an Entered Apprentice, shows that he became a man of good moral character and has subdued his base character. His next journey, by the salute of a Fellowcraft, shows that he has benefited by the lessons of life and acquired intellectual knowledge. Then comes the third journey: during which he is challenged first by the Intellect (JW) and then the Psyche (SW), who demand proof of his preparedness. In the Ontario working of the Degree, the password, which he does not yet know, is given on his behalf [and call to your mind now: the *import* of the word]. The candidate does not realize that he comes laden with worldly possessions, which in themselves carry the seeds of spiritual death. Then the Soul presents him to the Spirit as one

properly prepared to give up his current life: his personal will and worldly possessions, and all the other baggage that is keeping him attached to a materialistic life.

AT THE ALTAR

The steps to the altar are symbolically over an open grave, showing that the candidate will triumph over death, and continue forward unwaveringly along his path of progress on the other side of it. The number of the steps to the altar is the combination of the trinity of body, soul, and spirit and of the four elements, representing matter. It is the same number as that which forms a perfect lodge, and also the seven elements which form man, if we interpret it according to the ancient wisdom.

Note that the penal clause in the Obligation refers to all four of the Universal Elements (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water), which play a prominent role in the Ancient Mysteries.

The position of the Square and Compasses, in addition to the explanation given, indicates that the Spirit (represented by the Compasses) now dominates the body (represented by the Square). This indicates the coming forward of the Spirit into personal consciousness, so that the Mason can "work with both points of the compasses" and render the circle of his own being complete by attaining conscious alliance with his ultimate and only true self. I.e., the soul is now aware of, and can now work with, the spirit. **This is an important point** and, again, can be better understood with basic Theosophical knowledge.

THE LAST AND GREATEST TRIAL

The retrospective look at the first two degrees includes some significant messages. *"It enabled you.....to look beyond the narrow limits of particular institutions, whether civil or religious"*. This intimates that you have learned that there are things that should not be taken at face value: that *"fitted only for the reception of truth and wisdom"*, one should look beyond the surface, or the veil, to find truth and understanding. We learned *"to view in every son of Adam a brother of the dust"*. This refers to the fundamental Theosophic principle of the Universal Brotherhood of man, and that we all come from the same source and will return to the same source.

Proceeding onward, you were led to *"contemplate the intellectual faculties and to trace them from their development, through the paths of heavenly science, even unto the throne of God himself."* It is significant to remember *now* the statement from the Junior Warden's lecture in the first degree that *"learning originated in the East"*. The heavenly science referred to here is not Astronomy. It is part of *"the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science"* and refers to another Theosophic and Rosicrucian principle: knowledge of the *"unexplained laws of Nature"* (which has reference to the invisible world); and the steps required to rejoin with the Divine, as taught in the ancient mysteries.

As we have now been *"molded by virtue and science"*, i.e. by morals and knowledge, we are presented with the lesson that, through *contemplation* (or meditation), Nature *"finally instructs us how to die"*. Think about this statement. In the physical world, do we really need to be instructed *how* to die? According to the ancient mysteries, however,

the meaning is clear: we must prepare ourselves: we must learn what we need to know about "*the hidden laws of Nature*", in order to be "raised" beyond this mortal existence after we die. **This is another extremely important message** and again can be better understood through the fundamentals of the ancient wisdom.

The allegory of the death of Hiram Abif is a cautionary lesson. One aspect of our being, alone, cannot realize the nature of the Great Architect. It requires the *presence* and "*the consent of three*", i.e., body, mind, and spirit. There are aspects of ourselves ("*ruffians*") that desire this sublime knowledge (or "*secret*") before being ready and qualified. "*Diligence and patience will in due time entitle the **worthy** Mason to a participation in*" this knowledge. This warning is first given in the First Degree, using the symbolism of the sword and cable tow – *rashly rushing forward would make you accessory to your own death*. I will also point out that Hiram Abif was accosted when attempting to *exit* the temple, which is related to the cable tow – *being accessory to your own death*.

RAISING

The death and subsequent raising of the representative of the "*Grand Master*" Hiram Abif is a very obvious representation of the requirement for our current way of life (spiritual unconsciousness) to die before it can be raised to a sublime level. Our selfish attitudes and materialistic life must be left behind before we can obtain mastership of a higher order of life and faculty. Then, *darkness* becomes visible. Then, we have developed the ability to see through that "*mysterious veil which the eye of human reason cannot penetrate*". This is the true initiation of a Mason. This is when we understand the "*secrets and mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry*".

We are told to contemplate our inevitable death, knowing that *this transitory life shall pass away*, but we no longer fear it, as we realize that there resides within us a "*vital and immortal principle*". We realize that death is not the end, but the "*entrance to a better life*". But, we are warned that we must learn the lessons that we are meant to learn during this lifetime ("*be careful to perform your allotted task while it is yet day*"). We realize that we have to "*continue to listen to the voice of Nature*", to learn those secrets of Nature that will allow us to be raised up to a higher level. To accomplish this we must learn from "*that most important of all human studies: the knowledge of yourself*". Written over the portals of the ancient temples of Initiation were the words "*Know Thyself*". These are only two words, but a most difficult undertaking, which can only be fulfilled in accordance with the ancient knowledge and concentration of one's whole energy on the task of knowing one's true self. **This is another very important message** and all the points above are made clear in the ancient wisdom.

We are reminded again that the spirit cannot be raised to a sublime state with only physical or mental assistance (*these prove a slip*). Only by all three aspects acting together, and on the five points of fellowship, can we be raised. Spirit alone cannot accomplish the *allotted task*, but needs to work together with mind and body ("*the companions of our former toils*"). The five points of fellowship represent: Brotherly Love; providing assistance and support to mankind; soothing and relieving others (charity); trust; and respect.

Being “raised from a symbolic death to a reunion with the companions of your former toils” indicates that you can now go about your normal life and no longer need to fear death and the hereafter.

The *rising of the bright morning star* reminds us, once again, of seeing the *light* of knowledge and understanding, as well as giving peace of mind with regard to our physical demise.

THE SECRETS

The **penal signs**, in all the Degrees, have a corresponding relationship with certain energy centres within our being. In the Hindu metaphysical tradition, and in some other philosophical systems, these are called Chakras. In the First Degree, the penal sign is related to the Throat Chakra, which has to do with communication. In the Second Degree, the penal sign is related to the Heart Chakra, which has to do with compassion and love. In the Third Degree, the penal sign is related to the Solar Plexus Chakra, which has to do with the ability to be in control of our lives, and is a reminder to us to keep control of our lower nature.

Receiving the **password** in this degree, which denotes *worldly possessions*, is meant to remind us that if the soul becomes clogged and hampered by an obsession with worldly possessions (or material things), it will bring “death” to the soul and prevent its upward progress. I quote the words of the scriptures: “*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*”.

The “*secrets*” of this degree are the *substituted* ones “*until time and circumstances should restore the genuine ones*”. The time and circumstances are up to each individual. Each of us needs to discover them ourselves. There is another possible interpretation to this: that deep meditation can be a substitute for connecting to the Divine Spirit, and our physical death, determined by time and circumstances, will provide the real connection.

THE APRON

There are three rosettes on the Master Mason’s Apron. The rosette represents a rose, which is an important symbol of the Rosicrucians, and represents the unfolding of spiritual growth. These are arranged so as to form a triangle with the point upwards, interpenetrating the triangle formed by the flap of the apron. The lower triangle pointing upwards is the triangle of fire, the emblem of Shiva, and is a symbol of the Divine Spark, or spirit. The triangle made by the flap of the apron, pointing downwards, is the triangle of water, representative of the Soul. These two triangles are within a square, the emblem of matter, and therefore of the physical body, and so we see that the Master Mason’s apron symbolically represents the triune nature of man (body, soul, and spirit). The silver tassels each have seven chains with seven balls. The significance of the number Seven has already been mentioned

The clasp of the apron incorporates a serpent, which is a traditional emblem of the Divine Wisdom.

THE TRADITIONAL HISTORY

After Hiram Abif was slain, there was *utter confusion* in the precincts of the Temple. So it would be with ourselves. Regarding the Temple as our own being, if the “architect” was to be rendered helpless, there would be much chaos if our faculties were no longer under control of our Master Principle.

You will recall the three Fellowcraft Lodges who went in search of Hiram Abif. The first “*class*” found nothing of importance, and represents the **physical body**, which is useless beyond the grave. The next “*class*” discovered the body and subsequently returned to raise it, and represents the **Soul** which realizes that death does not end all. But the third “*class*” who found the culprits (who were subsequently sentenced for their crimes), represents the power which tells us what is right and wrong, the Divine Spark within us: the **Spirit**, and provides a message that offenders to our conscience must be eradicated (“sentenced to that death....”).

The secrets of a Master Mason, we are told in the ritual, could only be communicated in the presence and with the consent of three. The meaning already given is that all three aspects of our being must be developed and willing to receive the secrets of our immortal being to replace the substituted temporary ones (our mortal existence), as described earlier.

The mystical sprig of Acacia has three meanings which are applicable to us. The first being: the symbol of **Initiation**. The Acacia is also a symbol of **Innocence** or purity of life. This comes from the meaning of the Greek word *axaxia*. The third, and most important, since it is the great object of *this* degree, is the symbol of the **IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL**. This stems back to many legends, such as that of Osiris. The acacia is intended to remind us, by its evergreen nature, of that better and spiritual part within us, which can never die (the immortal principle).

Hiram Abif was “*ordered to be interred in a grave, from the centre, three feet east, three feet west, three feet between north and south, and five or more feet perpendicular*”. Have you ever thought about this statement, and tried to picture exactly where this position would be? Try to map this on a piece of paper. You will find that, as a geographical position, it does not make sense. How can the grave be both three feet east and three feet west? From the centre of: what? One could see, in this, a symbol for the cross. A clue to the true meaning, however, is given in the phrase “*from the centre*”. The place where Hiram Abif, and all he represents, is buried is at the centre (**our centre!**) It is at the centre, as taught in the ancient mysteries, where we will find the *genuine secrets*. And, being buried as near the Sanctum Sanctorum as the *law would permit* (and not in it) reminds us that this is the closest we can get to the Creator, in our

current state. Stemming from the Ancient Egyptian wisdom, the route from the heart to the tongue was called, by the Rosicrucians, the Sanctum Sanctorum.

The interpretation of the ornaments of a Master Masons Lodge: "*the Porch (the entrance of the Temple), the Dormer (the window which allows light into the Sanctum Sanctorum), and the Square Pavement (for the High-priest to walk on)*", are not difficult to interpret, and I'll leave that up to you to ponder.

WORKING TOOLS

Different jurisdictions use different working tools in this Degree, but there is one that seems to be common to all: the pencil. The ritual states: "*the Pencil teaches us that all our words and actions are not only observed but are recorded*". Most religions teach this, as part of their doctrine, to encourage people to do Good, as they will be judged by their actions and rewarded or punished, in the next life, accordingly. As the old saying goes "*you will reap what you sow*".

The ancient mysteries have a similar teaching, the law of cause and effect. However, it warns that the effect could appear in this life or the next. It is described as the law of absolute justice, an impartial law of Nature that cannot be escaped. This applies to deed, word, and thought. The Hindus, Buddhists, Rosicrucians, and Theosophists call it Karma, the Universal Law of Harmony. Theosophy teaches that our actions shape our destiny. This law operates whether or not we are conscious of it. *By our ignorance, we bind ourselves through selfish actions, feelings, and thoughts.* One of the lessons to be learned from this is that we can promote our own happiness and contentment only by creating the same in others.

THE CLOSING

WM: "Bro. J.W., whence come you?"

JW: "From the West, whither we have been in search of the genuine secrets of a Master Mason, W.S."

WM: "Bro. S.W., have you been successful in your researches?"

SW: "We have not, but we have discovered certain casual signs, tokens and words, which, with your permission, we are anxious to impart, W.S."

....

WM: "I do sanction and confirm, and declare that they shall designate you and all Master Masons throughout the world until time and circumstances shall restore to us the genuine ones"

Here we are reminded that we have only obtained substituted secrets, and we offer them as some consolation to the spirit (WM). These are communicated by the body to the soul, which passes them on to the spirit. Having received the substitutes, the Spirit

(W.M.), confirms their use until the true ones are restored through *time and circumstances*. This indicates that the quest is not ended but, in reality, it has just begun, and the time and circumstances are up to each individual.

CONCLUSION

The legend of the Grand Master Hiram Abif is consistent with the teachings and rites of the Ancient Mystery Schools, and the participants of this Masonic rite are touched by the forces that are the foundation of the human spiritual tradition. Initiation into the Ancient Mysteries was not simply a means of attaining intellectual knowledge. Aristotle wrote that it was actually the “**experience**”, not knowledge gained, which allowed the initiate to comprehend the secret meaning of the mysteries. This is something important to remember.

This enlightening, transformative experience has generally been termed rebirth, and appears to be the central theme of the most important rituals of almost all the Ancient Mystery Schools, as well as modern Initiatic organizations. At Eleusis, the teaching on rebirth was revealed through the symbolism of Kore’s descent into the underworld, her ascension from it, and the subsequent return of fertility. In the cults of Osiris, Dionysus, Attis, and Adonis, the main rite is their violent death and rebirth. In Christianity, the unjust crucifixion of Christ leads to the ultimate redemption of mankind. And within Freemasonry we experience the murder of our Grand Master Hiram Abif by three impatient, unqualified craftsmen, and the subsequent raising of his body. It appears that all the violent deaths represented by these ceremonies have something in common. They symbolize vice, ignorance, and chaos, and the inevitable slaying of the self, thereby making rebirth a necessity for “salvation”.

It is clear is that the Fellowcraft ruffians had not been able to “subdue their passions” and were thus driven by these passions to commit the terrible act. Because the “ruffians” allowed themselves to be governed by their passions, they murdered the qualities of a master within themselves. It is for us, therefore, to learn to subdue *our* passions so that the master within each of us may be raised. In this sense, one of the lessons of the legend of Hiram Abif is that of undying fidelity to the highest ideals.

In the formalities of the Master Mason’s Degree, the earnest Mason, the diligent pursuer of the path of Light, is given a clear chart of the process of spiritual self-development which he can follow up by his own subsequent exertions, and furthermore, he is directed to a key for finding truth, and discovering the hidden secrets and mysteries of his own being (the Light at the Centre).

From the Opening we learned that all life has issued out of the "East," i.e., from the Great World of Infinite Spirit, and has journeyed to the "West" or the Little World of finite material form and physical embodiment, and when duly perfected by experience, it is ordained to return to the "East ".

According to the ancient mysteries (or divine wisdom), the spirit endures “*repeated trials and approbations*”, affording it, through multiple iterations of life, the opportunity to turn *the rough ashlar into the perfect ashlar*.

The detailed methods employed in assisting properly qualified candidates to the Light of the centre, whether in the ancient systems or at the present day, and of the meaningful change brought about, in the candidate himself, is a matter that will not be described because the secrets and mysteries of true Initiation can never be fully communicated except in the course of the *process* itself. Masonry does not disclose them, at all, but provides various substituted ones which also provide indications that more genuine ones exist, which qualified Brethren will come to know when time and circumstances warrant. To all others they will remain lost. That time, and those circumstances, depends upon our own efforts in the search for light. For those who are not content with pomp and ceremony, who desire, not a mere formal ritual, but the living spirit, and are bent on plumbing its well-guarded secrets and mysteries to their depth, and living out its implications to the full, Masonry may well come to be, as for some it *has*, the most significant experience of their lives.

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