

Letting in the Light

by

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Question #1: The Cedars of Lebanon have a deep philosophical and metaphysical meaning not only in this Degree, but also in the 3rd Degree of Craft Masonry. Write a paper on the symbolic significance of the tree.

The Cedars of Lebanon are one of the main symbols in the Twenty-second Degree, Knight Royal Axe, or Prince of Libanus. Together with the axe, they form the central metaphor of the degree, teaching us that honest work is the mission of man (*Bridge*, 176). But while doing honest work is an important lesson, what the idea of work symbolizes in the degree goes even further. On the one hand, we have the notion that cutting down the Cedars is emblematic of human progress and the civilization of the wild, a concept that would have been quite apropos in the America of Pike's time. On the other hand, however, we find that, as in much of Masonry, the framing myth is but a lesson for the individual man to apply to himself. Thus, in much the same way that the story of the building of Solomon's Temple becomes a metaphor for building the Temple of our own character, so felling the Cedars of Lebanon and taming the wild is also a metaphor for cutting down our own vices and taming our own wild nature as individuals. Think of the Masonic application of the Common Gavel, which we were given way back as Entered Apprentices.

In this paper I will elaborate on these ideas. But I will also bring to your attention a small but startling detail that I stumbled across in my reading—one which I have never seen mentioned before and which may be worthy of further study.

When the candidate first enters the carpenter's workshop on Mount Libanus, he expresses his desire to be a Knight Royal Axe, or Prince of Libanus. When asked what qualifies him for such an honor, his haughty reply is, "The claim of birth and rank in Masonry." The answer given by the Venerable Chief is a mini-manifesto, railing against anyone who thinks that privilege alone is enough to merit distinction. I quote it at length, hoping that as you read it you will keep in mind the context of a nation that is less than one hundred years old, and striving to be a classless society which rejects the traditional "rights" of the aristocracy. For the word "Masonry," substitute "Society."

Birth is not regarded here; and rank in Masonry does not of itself suffice. We are all workmen in our several vocations...
No one can, by our constitutions, be admitted to the high

privileges of this Degree, unless he has first wrought one year in the workshop, and obtained the unanimous suffrage of the workmen. Is your desire for this Degree sufficient to induce you to lay aside your insignia, your sword and jewel, for a time, and join the sons of labor, who represent the toiling millions? (Drama, 6).

To his credit, the candidate answers that he is willing to work for the honor of being a Knight Royal Axe, and not just have it given to him. He is further questioned, “Does he acknowledge the dignity of labor and know that it is no curse, but a privilege, for man to be allowed to earn his sustenance by work?” and “Does he admit that the honest laboring man, upright and independent, is, in nature’s heraldry, the peer of kings and that not labor, but idleness, is disgraceful?” (Drama, 8). One can just hear the scathing indictment of the idle upper classes and ruling families that were left behind in Europe, even as the can-do, lift-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps work ethic of the New World is lauded. Work hard, and you are the equal of any king—a message we also learned in the character of Hiram Abif. Indeed, Pike says as much in the lecture for this degree in *Morals and Dogma*. “Masonry has made a working-man and his associates the Heroes of her principal legend, and himself the companion of Kings...From first to last, Masonry is work” (340).

By the end of the drama, the candidate has learned that honest work—no matter in what field—makes a man worthy of honor and respect, not his rank, titles, or riches. Thus, at the end of the drama it is declared, “The Cedars of Mount Libanus are felled” (Drama, 14). That is, giving up one’s sense of entitlement based on attributes other than hard work could be metaphorically called “felling the cedar.”

There is more, however, to cutting down the Cedars of Lebanon than just an appreciation of an honest day’s work. Cutting down such great and mighty trees is symbolic of the progress of man. We are told in the Drama of the degree, “The ax is the great agent of civilization and improvement. Troops armed with that weapon have conquered barbarism. Under its blows, the primeval forests disappear and the husbandman displaces the wild hunter. To the rude barbarism of the early ages succeed settled society and laws as well as all the arts that refine and elevate mankind. The ax is nobler than the sword” (Drama, 10). This tribute to the march of civilization is echoed by Pike in the lecture. “Man perfects himself by working.

Jungles are cleared away. Fair seed-fields rise instead, and stately cities; and whithal, the man himself first ceases to be a foul unwholesome jungle and desert thereby” (*Morals*, 342).

And here we see, in the last clause of this sentence, that we are not just praising work because through it we achieve the conquest of wild land, but the conquest of the wild within ourselves. Through hard work, *man himself* ceases to be a foul and unwholesome thing. This concept is elaborated on time and again throughout the lecture of the degree. “Every man has a work to do in himself, greater and sublimer than any work of genius; and works upon a nobler material than wood or marble—upon his own soul and intellect” (*Morals*, 349). Thus, the Cedars of Lebanon are symbols of those things which we must cut out of our lives in order to cultivate our higher nature.

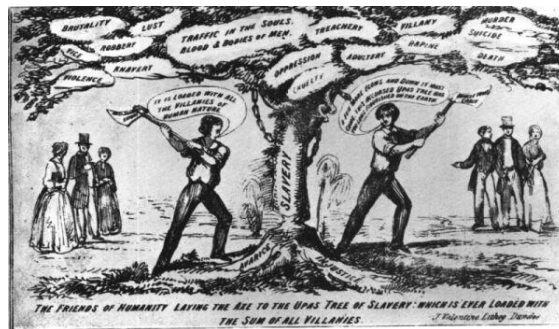
In the Drama, this connection is made explicit when the candidate is told, “And as the great trees fall before [the sturdy pioneer], never to rise again, so Masonry hews at those mighty trees: intolerance, bigotry, superstition, uncharitableness, and idleness. These vices have described our condition for centuries. We seek to open the human mind to the light of truth and reason” (10). Felling the trees, then, of the named vices lets in the light of truth and reason, just as felling actual trees lets in the light of the sun. This quote is also remarkable in its use of the word “pioneer.” Clearly we are not talking about workers on Mount Libanus any longer, but have again switched the metaphor to the American westward movement.

Now, on to a curiosity I found while preparing this paper. While reading the entry for this degree in *Liturgy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, I came upon a passage that is nearly identical to the one quoted in the previous paragraph. “And as the great trees fall before [the sturdy pioneer], never to rise again, so Masonry hews at those mighty upas-trees, Intolerance, Bigotry, Superstition, Uncharitableness, and Idleness; and lets in the light of truth and reason upon the human mind, which these vices have darkened for centuries” (*Liturgy*, 57). Did you see it? Read it again.

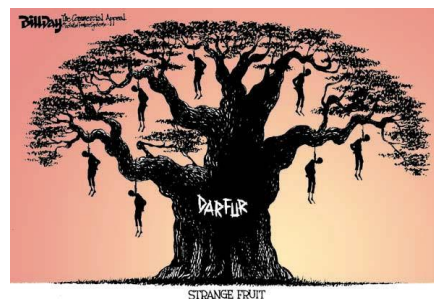
What in the world, I asked myself, is a “upas-tree”? Checking my encyclopedia (an actual physical set!) I found the following. “Native to the tropics of Africa and Asia...the latex [a milky substance, not to be confused with sap] of the upas is highly toxic and has been used for poisoning arrows. In some areas the tree was fabled to be so poisonous that humans or

animals who came close to it died” (Academic American, 473). Having done a little more poking around on the internet, I found that in the mid to late nineteenth century the upas tree became a symbol of anything that, by its very nature, could be seen as toxic or poisonous. Sometimes associating a thing with a upas tree simply meant that it was undesirable. At other times, the tree metaphor was deeper than that, meaning that the topic at hand needed to be “cut down” or “taken out by the roots.” (See Juvenile Instructor web site in List of Works Consulted.)

Remember that *Morals and Dogma* was published in 1872, and slavery was still very much on the minds of most Americans. It is interesting that Pike uses the term “upas-tree” in his passage about the Cedars of Lebanon, specifically naming Intolerance and Bigotry as trees that need hewing. Indeed, an editorial cartoon of the period specifically names slavery as a upas tree, and shows it being cut down.



The metaphor of the upas tree was taken further when, in 1939, Billie Holiday made famous the song “Strange Fruit,” based on a poem protesting the lynching of African Americans. The central image, of course, compares bodies hanging from trees with fruit, and has been used to protest even more recent atrocities, as you see here:



I am not a Pike scholar, and don't pretend to know where he stood on this massive issue when his masterpiece was published in 1872. But I do find it fascinating that an image he used—that of the “upas-tree”—when describing those vices that Masons need to “cut down,” in order to let in the light, is still being used today.

To conclude, the Cedars of Lebanon are not only symbols of human progress and the march of civilization, but stand (or fall, as the case may be) as metaphors for those vices or evils which need to be cut out of not only society at large, but the individual as well. Both operatively and speculatively, hewing down the Cedars lets in the light, and the very act of cutting down these “upas-trees” improves the character of the Mason. “It was well to give the earth to man as a dark mass, whereon to labor. It was well to provide rude and unsightly materials in the ore-bed and the forest, for him to fashion into splendor and beauty...because the act creating them is better than the things themselves” (*Morals*, 343). Finally, let us not forget that tradition tells us the Cedars of Lebanon were used to fashion Noah's Ark, the Ark of the Covenant, and Solomon's Temple. Hewing them not only lets in the light of reason and truth, but gives us good materials with which to fashion our moral and Masonic edifice.

List of Works Consulted

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“upas tree.” Academic American Encyclopedia, 1992 ed.

Example of a web site exploring the upas tree as a symbol:
<http://www.juvenileinstructor.org/mormonism-as-a-upas-tree/>