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25<sup>th</sup> Degree – Knight of the Brazen Serpent  
Topic 1

### “Taming the Serpent“

*“Wisdom, apart from obedience to God, degenerates into cunning, and degrades and envenoms man’s nature. Wisdom, yielding to the divine law, is the source of healing and restoring influences...” (Smith 607)*

Snakes. The very sight of them makes my skin crawl. I don’t know exactly what it is about these slithering reptiles, but the creatures paralyze me with fear. Maybe it’s the fact that some snakes are poisonous – striking with deadly venom; maybe it’s the way they move – quick and silent; maybe it’s their physical power – constricting and suffocating; maybe it’s their eyes – cold and sly. Whatever “it” is, these creepy-crawlies give me the heebie-jeebies.

Despite my personal aversions to the serpent, some people seem utterly fearless when dealing with the creatures. One of these fearless classes of people includes mysterious snake charmers. As a boy – and man - watching *Indiana Jones* movies, whose central character I can clearly identify with, I have always been fascinated by scenes of instrument wielding snake charmers literally taming the serpent as it rises from the basket. Taming a creature so powerful and dangerous seems almost impossible, yet these charmers have obviously mastered their art and subdued the serpent.

Obviously, the snake serves as a prominent portion of the Knight of the Brazen Serpent’s jewel. The serpent along with the tau cross surmounted by a circle forms the jewel of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree. As with most Masonic symbols, what seems so simple and facile at first is riddled with layers of meaning and mystery. Quite possibly the jewel reminds us to

tame the serpent, and in so doing we receive the ultimate reward of leading a faith-filled life dedicated to love, relief, and truth.

### The Tau Cross

The Tau Cross is shaped like the English letter “T.” Freemasons are well acquainted with the Tau cross, as illustrated by the customary use of the T-square in Masonic symbolism. If we consider the step of an Entered Apprentice, the initiate’s feet form this revered symbol. According to Manly Hall, the Tau is the oldest form of the cross. It may have derived from the Egyptians, who attached sanctity to the bull’s horns (Hall 564). Unlike the Latin cross, which is normally associated with the New Testament, the Tau cross is associated with the Old Testament, as is the story of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree. To the Egyptians as well as the Chaldeans, the Tau cross was an emblem of life and immortality. The Egyptians also regarded the Tau cross, or the ankh, as a symbol of divinity (Harding). In the Hebrew alphabet, “T” is the last letter. Hindus, Jews, and Christians have inscribed the Tau cross upon the foreheads of their faithful followers. Hindus regard it as a “third eye” or window to the soul, Jews have used it a sign of salvation, and Christians revere it as a token of penitence during the season of Lent (Mackey 762). From ancient times comes another interesting application of inscribing the Tau upon one’s forehead. When marked upon the foreheads of people accused of crimes, the Tau meant they been acquitted of those charges. Hence, we see the Tau employed as a symbol of liberation (Hall 569). In addition, ancients regarded the Tau cross as representing healing and protection (Harding). To the Druids, the Tau cross represented Jupiter, their chief deity (Mackey 762). Finally, the Cabalists or Kabbalists used the Tau cross to represent the number “10,” which they regard as the “perfect” number, alluding back to the Pythagorean Tetractys and the ineffable name of

deity (Pike 505).

As mentioned, a circle is surmounted upon the Tau cross on the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree's jewel. Also called the Crux Ansata, this cross represents life (Hall 565). Obviously, the circle symbolizes infinity. Hence, when combined with the Tau cross of life, a symbol for *eternal* life or immortality is revealed (Pike 505). To the Egyptians, the Crux Ansata was a phallic symbol representing the powers of regeneration. The Tau signified the masculine principle and the circle or oval illustrated the feminine principle (Hall 569).

Overall, the Tau cross and the Crux Ansata represent balance, both figures having vertical symmetry. The Tau cross and the Crux Ansata remind us of the balance between faith and reason, between the material and the spiritual. This doctrines of balance, harmony, and equilibrium are hallmarks of the mystery traditions' teachings as well as the great lessons of our Masonic Order.

### The Serpent

Any survey of the ancient world reveals that it was indeed fascinated by the serpent. We find the serpent used in virtually every ancient culture's symbolism. The coiled serpent was used in the royal ensign of the Pharaohs (Claussen 151). When extended, the Egyptians regarded the serpent as possessed with Divine Wisdom; however, when we see the snakes tail in its own mouth it is a representation of eternity, and it reminds us that time preys upon itself (Pike 497). To the followers of Zoroaster the snake symbolized the universe. In China, the ring between the two serpents represented the world governed by the power and wisdom of the Creator (Mackey 681).

The color of the serpent is either blue or green in color. In Pike's Liturgy, the serpent is described as a "steel, blue color" (De Hoyos 497 & 504). However, other sources

describe the snake as being green in color. Blue typically represents faith and fidelity, which is easily applicable to the teachings of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree. Green is linked to the idea of renewal, which again aligns to a central theme in this Degree. Whether blue or green in color, “the Brazen Serpent, Nakhas, is a symbol of the wise interpretation which rescues the Divine Truths from the depravation which they have undergone by means of the ignorance of many interpreters...” (De Hoyos 516). It probably matters not the color of the serpent; the important thing is that we read the symbolism of the serpent clearly by avoiding preconceived ideas or prejudices we may hold toward it.

In the Old Testament we see the snake used as the sign of a healer or a savior, but how can a poisonous snake be viewed as a healer or savior? Here we see another example of duality in the fact that the remedy to overcome a poisonous bite is contained within the very venom inducing the poisoning. As in the story from Numbers 21:6-9, which inspired the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree’s drama in the pre-2003 versions, Moses’ followers were saved from the venomous bite of the serpents by looking upon the cross intertwined with the snake (Mackey 681). Interestingly, a serpent wound around a staff in the ancient mysteries was the sign of a physician, which certainly compliments the idea of the serpent’s healing, saving features (Hall 237). However, the Old Testament also reveals a serpent known for cunning and malevolence, as we see in the traditional interpretation of Adam and Eve’s story. Even though most Christians regard the serpent in this creation story as an evil tempter, Manly Hall offers a unique interpretation. According to him, even in this story “the serpent is true to the principle of wisdom, for it tempts man to the knowledge of himself” (Hall 238). In this light, the serpent’s role is closer to that of an educator rather than a tempter, teaching Adam and Eve about their true nature - that is, their human nature

- which is obviously an imperfect condition.

The Serpent is also associated with astrology. Though less common, the constellation Scorpio can be represented by a Serpent (Hall 136). When Scorpio is visible in the night sky, it signals the arrival of autumn (Hutchins 221). Hence, Scorpio informs us that winter draws near, the warmth of the sun is diminishing, and the days are becoming shorter and shorter. Symbolically, this is the time of year that signifies our approaching death. Since the serpent extends over Libra and Scorpio, ancient cultures regarded the serpent as the gate through which the soul descends, or ascends as the case may be. Thus, from an astrological perspective the serpent is regarded as the author of the fate of souls (Pike 492-93).

The fact that that snake sheds its skin teaches us one of the key lessons of this Degree, the lesson of continuous renewal (Mackey 681). It also reminds us of the immortality of the soul, an entity that lives on even after death (Pike 496). As Masons, we are to continually hone the rough ashlar of our human nature into the perfect ashlar of our Divine nature. By shedding our passions, vices, and frailties, we renew and perfect ourselves, thereby fulfilling our destiny as children of a Divine Creator. Through reformation, repentance, and knowledge, we chip away the sharp edges of the rough ashlar and form the smooth texture of the perfect ashlar (Hutchins 214).

#### The Jewel as a Whole

In sum, the Tau cross depicted on the jewel of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree teaches us that through balance, harmony, and equilibrium we arrive at the core of our being – the spark of the Divine - which is implanted in every child of God. Hence, we arrive at the state of perfection, signified by the circle surmounted upon the Tau. However, the snake of wisdom

guards the circle of immortality. In order to arrive at perfection, we must overcome our fears, our frailties, our passions, and our desires – those things that envenom our souls and lead us astray. As in the ancient mysteries of Bacchus Saba-Zeus where the snake was flung upon the chest of her initiates, we must be willing to conquer our fears, our ineptitudes, and to reflect upon and repent of our shortcomings (Claussen 151). As in every Masonic Degree, the Knight of the Brazen Serpent learns “that the noblest purposes and duties of man in life are to struggle and overcome and win mastery over the material and sensual, to reach the spiritual and divine within himself. There is in him, as in the universe, God’s harmony and beauty and equilibrium (Claussen 156).” Consecrating our lives to the pursuit of brotherly love, relief, and truth brings us in harmony with mankind and the Divine.

Thus, the jewel of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree reminds us of the importance of balance and teaches us to keep earthly Reason and Divine Faith in perfect harmony. We have to tame the serpent, and by doing so we achieve wisdom and immortality. Always faithfully looking to the Creator for guidance and direction, we utilize the gift of reason to act wisely and decide justly. As we faithfully journey to discover our human nature, we discover Divine nature, and at least we arrive at the light of wisdom.

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Harding, Paul, Ed. ♂Tau: Crux Commissa, Franciscan, Anticipatory, Advent, or St. Anthony's

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