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Topic 3

“The *Mysteries* of Masonry?”

Today was a special day. It was one year after college graduation - one year of working in the “real” world. The young man decided to join the Masonic Lodge in his hometown. He was familiar with fraternities since he was a member of the Greek community during college. Throughout his days as an undergraduate, he met several alumni members of his and other college fraternities who were also Freemasons. Although these people truly convinced him to become a Freemason, the fact that his grandfather was a Mason intrigued him as well.

After making contact with a local Mason who was also a college fraternity alumnus, arrangements were made to meet two of the Lodge’s members and obtain a petition. The two men were nice enough to meet the young man and his fraternity brother at the Lodge.

Following introductions and small talk, some information was provided on the Freemasons along with a petition. Two days later the young man was proudly returning his petition.

“Thank you for sponsoring me into the Lodge. I’m really excited about joining,” the young man explained.

“Well we’re happy to have you,” said one of the Lodge members.

“By the way, why does the petition say ‘for the *Mysteries* of Masonry’? What does ‘mysteries’ refer to?”

“It’s just what they call it, I guess. Masonry has all kinds of weird words and phrases because it’s old.”

Only later would the young man discover the answer to his question...

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The Nature of the Mysteries

Freemasonry’s connection to the ancient mystery traditions is well documented. The term “mystery traditions” refers to ancient religious societies that practiced initiation ceremonies. Mystery traditions such as the Orphic movement are documented in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.ⁱ According to Albert Pike, the mysteries traveled from India to Chaldea then to Egypt and Greece.ⁱⁱ The mysteries were especially popular during the time of Alexander the Great.ⁱⁱⁱ Alexander ushered in a blend of Eastern and Western thought, opening the minds of individuals to new ideas and concepts.^{iv} Members of mystery schools included such educated and influential men as Plutarch, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Julian, Proclus,^v Plato, Moses, and Pythagoras.^{vi}

With the rise of Christianity in the first century AD, the mystery traditions were heavily scrutinized. However, even before the advent of Christianity the mystery traditions were facing some stiff critiques. Philosophers began questioning the gods’ values and morals.^{vii} Also, the Roman Empire tried to eradicate the mysteries because they favored a more political and patriotic religious system. In AD 19, Tiberius expelled anyone associated with mystery traditions, including all Orientals and Jews, while also dismantling the Temple of Isis, killing devoted followers.^{viii} Constantine officially dissolved the mysteries in favor of Christianity. Despite these bans, the mysteries may have survived in Eastern Europe, Northern Spain, and Southern France.^{ix}

Because Christians destroyed the literature and temples dedicated to the mysteries, little is known as to their contents.^x Further, there was no set dogma or “Bible” that the mysteries followed; rather, they relied heavily on the oral tradition.^{xi} Thus, the contents of the mysteries likely varied from time to time and from place to place. However, some details have managed to survive. In the case of the Mystery Traditions, “mystery” means “to close,” and “closed” refers to the fact that the teachings were kept secret.^{xii} Though numerous, the mysteries of Isis, Orpheus, Dionysus, Ceres, and Mithras were the largest and most popular.^{xiii} The Mysteries dealt with topics such as death and resurrection and the reconciliation of opposites.^{xiv} Also, topics such as life, love, knowledge and immortality were discussed.^{xv}

It seems as though anyone was able to participate in the mysteries regardless of ethnicity, political affiliations, or social status.^{xvi} Most traditions were open to men and women alike; however, the mysteries of Mithras were limited to men and were very popular among soldiers.^{xvii} The candidates for initiation made a conscious choice to join the order, “join(ing) an association of people united in their quest for personal salvation.”^{xviii} Candidates need only have been just, upright, and true – people of good morals who kept a tongue of good report.^{xix} Some joined for social reasons, and if so they were not excluded from the group. However, there was also a class of initiates termed “mystai.” It was these individuals that inherited the true secrets and teachings of the mysteries.^{xx}

Overall, initiation into the mysteries consisted of three stages: preparation and probation, initiation and communion, and blessedness and salvation.^{xxi} Stage one, or preparation and probation, usually involved an obligation, a time of fasting and/or

abstinence, and a pilgrimage.^{xxii} After the candidate proved himself during the initial trial, he was formally welcomed and entered into a sacred bond with the Order. However, even after he was made a formal member, there was more to learn. Aristotle believed that the initiate into the mysteries really learned nothing; however, he took an active part in an experience that put him in a certain state of mind – a state that lead to wisdom and understanding.^{xxiii} Hence, the third phase of blessedness and salvation was a gradual process that was never truly completed.

What did these mysteries teach that took so long to comprehend? The mysteries all dealt with the three great doctrines of ancient theosophy: God, man, and nature.^{xxiv} They spoke of reason and virtue, of death and eternity, of hidden truths and the perfection of the soul. Despite their time in history, the mysteries were largely monotheistic, teaching that there was but one Supreme God.^{xxv} Initiation into the mysteries was an act of “participating in an increasingly intimate union with the Holy,” and they “were designed to illuminate the nature of the Divine though (this) initiatic” experience.^{xxvi} Plus, the mysteries concealed many of their teachings through symbolism; hence, the initiate was only able “to grasp as much as his mental capacity (could) acquire.”^{xxvii}

The Eleusinian Mysteries

By and large, the mysteries were centered on agrarian festivals.^{xxviii} One of the most famous and well documented of these agrarian mystery traditions is the Eleusinian mysteries, which took place yearly during autumn. Unlike many of the other mystery schools, the mysteries of Eleusis are named after a place rather than a god or goddess. Eleusis was a place close to Athens, Greece. These mysteries dealt with Demeter, the goddess of the Grain, and her daughter Prosethene. After Hades captures Persephone and

takes her to the underworld, Demeter is obligated to rescue her. Of course, while Demeter is absent from the world and searching for her daughter in the underworld, the crops die and wither away. Demeter is successful, and once again returns to the world where she again allows the crops to grow.^{xxix}

Candidates for the mysteries of Eleusis walked from Athens to Eleusis. During this parade, the people sang and danced. Once they arrived in Eleusis, they engaged in ritual bathing and purification. Afterwards, they would watch a mystery play that dealt with the story of Demeter, Prosethene, and Hades.^{xxx} The Eleusinian mysteries had three sacred observances in its ritual: legomena (things recited), deiknymena (things shown), and dromena (things performed). Hence, the candidates would recite sacred words and songs, they would be shown certain symbols, and they would view a mystical drama aimed at teaching them truths beyond typical human conception.^{xxxi} These mysteries involved a Hierophant, or one who shows sacred things, and was known to involve a class of membership known as the epopteia – the highest stage of understanding where one becomes an epoptes or “beholder.”^{xxxii}

The Mysteries of Isis

Another mystery tradition dealt with the goddess Isis. Again, these mysteries centered on a mythological story or allegory. The Egyptian gods Nut (Sky) and Geb (Earth) gave birth to two sets of twins: Isis and Osiris, Seth and Nephthys. Isis and Osiris became a couple and likewise so did Seth and Nephthys. Osiris was the god of agriculture, architecture, writing, astronomy, and the mystery rites. Isis was the goddess of weaving, food, music, dancing, and painting. Osiris mistakenly sleeps with Nephthys, and as a result he fathers Anubis – the jackal headed god. As any other husband, Seth was not happy about

this “mistake.” During a party, Seth plays a trick on Osiris. Prior to the party, Seth had a beautiful sarcophagus made to fit Osiris. During the party, he offers the sarcophagus as a gift to whoever fits the mold. After several failed attempts by other party guests, Osiris lies down in the sarcophagus. Seth, assisted by 72 accomplices, traps Osiris in the sarcophagus and throws the sarcophagus containing Osiris into the Nile River. The sarcophagus washes ashore in Byblos, where a beautiful Erica tree grows with the casket contained in its trunk. Because of the tree’s beauty and wonderful fragrance, the King has it hewed and made into a pillar for his palace.^{xxxiii}

Conveniently, Isis traveled to Byblos to begin taking care of the newly born prince. She planned to make the prince immortal by placing the baby in a trance and succumbing him to fire to burn off the mortal parts. One night, the Queen finds Isis burning her baby and utters a scream, causing the baby to wake. Isis reveals her true identity and purpose – she wishes to have the pillar containing her husband’s casket. In exchange, the prince is made immortal. The King and Queen agree and Isis is allowed to take the pillar. Upon opening the sarcophagus, Isis sleeps with Osiris and conceives Horus, although it should be noted that Osiris is not alive during this union. Isis and Horus hide from Seth until a wild boar sent from the evil brother finds them. The boar tears Osiris into fourteen pieces, one piece for each of the fourteen days of the waning moon, and scatters them throughout the world. Isis, Nephthys, and Anubis all search for the pieces, finding them all except the phallus. According to one story, the pieces were all buried where they were found, which could be cause of reference to the numerous tombs of Osiris. The other story suggests that Anubis is able to put Osiris back together and Isis makes Osiris a new phallus.^{xxxiv}

Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, battles Seth to avenge his father. During the battle, Horus loses an eye but takes one of Seth's testicles. The eye is offered to Osiris and he is restored to life, where he then becomes the Lord of the Netherworld.^{xxxv}

Like the candidates for the mysteries at Eleusis, candidates taking part in the mysteries of Isis began by cleansing themselves in a rite of purity, an act that is almost a sure predecessor of Christian baptism. Afterwards, the candidate was placed in a robe, probably white in color, and brought before a conclave of hierophants who were assembled in a vault or cavern. He had to prove his worthiness, and afterwards he was sequestered and kept a vigil or sorts for a period of time. During this period, he may have had to repeat certain mantras. Also, he was presented with certain images to enliven his mind, forcing him to think and ponder certain truths.^{xxxvi}

According to Plutarch, Osiris represented the Nile River and Isis represented the land, fertilized by the annual flooding of the Nile. Osiris and Isis also had astronomical counterparts, the sun and moon respectively, and Seth represented the darkness of winter.^{xxxvii} Thus, the story of Isis, Osiris, and Seth accounts for the fertile Spring and life as well as the barren Winter and death.

Connecting Freemasonry and the Mysteries

Obviously, like the mystery traditions, Freemasonry is an initiatic tradition. As the candidates of old, so the candidates of today for the mysteries of Masonry engage in similar ceremonies rituals throughout the many rites of the Craft. Freemasonry's rituals involve such practices as lustration, being placed in darkness (and being brought to light), and being presented with symbols and images to contemplate. By and large, our ceremonies adhere to the same three stages of the mystery traditions' initiation ceremonies:

preparation and probation, initiation and communion, and blessedness and salvation.

Masonic candidates are prepared, presented, and initiated; afterwards, they are taught through lecture and symbolism and instructed that there is still much more to learn.

Masonic candidates join the fraternity for a variety of reasons: social interaction, philanthropic motives, and enlightenment to name a few. Likewise, the mystery traditions had a similar membership base. Quite possibly the practice of initiating a variety of individuals from an array of backgrounds stem from those same practices of the ancient mystery traditions.

Further, we see representation of the sun and the moon in our Symbolic Lodges and other Masonic rites. The Masonic East and West are important symbols to the Craft and we see images of the sun and moon displayed on numerous examples of Masonic regalia. Likewise, the sun and moon are represented in mystery traditions such as those of Isis, and for good reason. One of the universal themes and teachings of the mystery schools involves the reconciliation of opposites.^{xxxviii} The sun and moon represent these opposites to both the ancient and modern initiate. Still more examples of opposites exist in Freemasonry. In the Entered Apprentice degree, we become acquainted with the mosaic pavement and learn of the opposites of good and evil, light and dark, and their reconciliation by aid of the Divine, represented by the blazing star. In the Fellow Craft degree, we find the two pillars representing strength and beauty. The candidate becomes the middle pillar of wisdom, the trait that balances and reconciles the two outside pillars. The Scottish Rite's emblem of the double-headed eagle also teaches of balance, equilibrium, and the reconciliation of opposites.

The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite deals directly with the mysteries in a way that the York Rite system does not, especially when we consider the timing for reunions. In the 23rd Degree, Chief of the Tabernacle, the candidate is instructed to “approach our mysteries with clean hands, a pure heart, and a sincere desire to serve your fellowman, and thus God.”^{xxxix} During the degree, the candidate is taught to serve God and the welfare of man and to contemplate the nature of God. The candidate is placed in darkness, he sees a “blinding” light, and prays for mercy and forgiveness – he prays for a pure heart, generosity, and devotion.^{xl} Such ceremonies are almost assuredly taken from what remains of the rituals used in the mystery traditions.

Further, the degrees of Freemasonry do not reveal all of their secrets. Rather, the mysteries are contained within the symbols of the Craft. In this manner, Aristotle’s assertion rings true today in the halls of Masonic lodges throughout the world. Like Aristotle, Pike viewed symbols as “a more efficacious instrument of instruction than plain dialectic language (because) we are habitually indifferent to that which is acquired without effort.”^{xli} Taking part in the ritual makes a member, but contemplating the Craft’s symbols, learning her lessons, and enacting her teachings is what makes him a Mason. Further, as Walter Burkert observes, “(secrecy) cannot really be betrayed because told to the public it would appear insignificant.”^{xlii}

Although the history of the fraternity certainly has a nicely documented beginning date in 1717, our heritage truly dates back to the time of antiquity – hence, the term “Ancient Craft Masonry.” The founders of the Masonic fraternity relied upon the nature and practices of the ancient mystery schools to provide binding ceremonies and to teach

fundamental universal truths to their members. Freemasonry has kept the traditions of old alive and well in the present.

Again, today was a special day. The once young man was now much older. As he reflected upon his introduction to the Ancient Craft, he remembered the two gentlemen who introduced him to the Lodge. They may not have know about the mystery traditions, but they were dedicated Masons with good hearts who led clean lives.

As the candidate entered his Lodge, he remembered how nervous he was when he first joined. He approached the neophyte and said, "Welcome to the Lodge. I think you will enjoy our members and I know you will enjoy Freemasonry. It takes some time and dedication, but it's all worth it. You will certainly get out of Masonry more than you will ever put into it. Do you have any questions I can answer for you?"

"Well, I read a lot on the Internet, so I kind of know a few things about the fraternity and all. But say, do you know why my petition says that I'm petitioning for the 'mysteries' of Freemasonry? What's that all about?"

" You know, I had the same question when I was in your shoes. Let's sit down and talk about a few things."

ⁱ Angus, Samual. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pg. 14.

ⁱⁱ Pike, Albert. *Morals and Dogma*. Richmond: J.H. Jenkins, 1945. Pg. 353.

ⁱⁱⁱ Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 3.

^{iv} Angus, Samual. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pg. 15.

^v Ibid. Pg. 16.

^{vi} Clausen, Henry. *Clausen's Commentary on Morals and Dogma*. San Diego: Neyenesch, 1985. Pg. 139.

^{vii} Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 3.

^{viii} Angus, Samual. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pg 38.

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- ix Algeo, John, Ph.D. *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. 2006. Theosophical Society in America. Google. 2 August 2009 < <http://video.google.com>>.
- x Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pg. 41.
- xi Burkett, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. 1987. Pg. 72.
- xii Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 4.
- xiii Pike, Albert. *Morals and Dogma*. Richmond: J.H. Jenkins, 1945. Pg. 352.
- xiv Algeo, John, Ph.D. *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. 2006. Theosophical Society in America. Google. 2 August 2009 < <http://video.google.com>>.
- xv Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pgs. 53 and 63.
- xvi Ibid. Pg. 66.
- xvii Algeo, John, Ph.D. *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. 2006. Theosophical Society in America. Google. 2 August 2009 < <http://video.google.com>>.
- xviii Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 4.
- xix Clausen, Henry. *Clausen's Commentary on Morals and Dogma*. San Diego: Neyenesch, 1985. Pg. 140.
- xx Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 8.
- xxi Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 1966. Pg. 76.
- xxii Ibid. pgs. 77, 86, and 88.
- xxiii Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 12.
- xxiv Pike, Albert. *Morals and Dogma*. Richmond: J.H. Jenkins, 1945. Pg. 357.
- xxv Ibid. pg. 359.
- xxvi Wasserman, James. *The Mystery Traditions*. Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2005. Preface Pg. IX.
- xxvii Clausen, Henry. *Clausen's Commentary on Morals and Dogma*. San Diego: Neyenesch, 1985. Pg. 140.
- xxviii Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 8.
- xxix Algeo, John, Ph.D. *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. 2006. Theosophical Society in America. Google. 2 August 2009 < <http://video.google.com>>.
- xxx Ibid.
- xxxi Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987. Pg. 10.
- xxxii Ibid. Pg. 5.
- xxxiii Campbell, Joseph. *The Mythic Image*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1974. Pgs. 21-29.
- xxxiv Ibid.
- xxxv Ibid.
- xxxvi Leadbeater, C.W. *Freemasonry and its Ancient Mystic Rites*. New York: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986. Pg. 32.
- xxxvii Ibid. pg. 37.

^{xxxviii} Algeo, John, Ph.D. *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry*. 2006. Theosophical Society in America. Google. 2 August 2009 < <http://video.google.com>>.

^{xxxix} De Hoyos, Arturo. *Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide*. Washington, DC: Supreme Council, 33°, Southern Jurisdiction, 2007. Pg. 470.

^{xl} Hutchens, Rex R. *A Bridge to Light*. Williamston, S.C.: Electric City, 1995. Pgs. 194-97.

^{xli} Pike, Albert. *Morals and Dogma*. Richmond: J.H. Jenkins, 1945. Pg. 355.

^{xlii} Burkett, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Presidents and Fellows of Harvard, 1987. Pg. 9.