

A Masonic Minute

'Veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'

From time to time a well-meaning Brother will raise a concern that there are certain inaccuracies in our Masonic Rituals, at variance with details recorded in the Sacred Writings. For example, the Ritual refers to Isaac as the *only* son of Abraham, while the Hebrew scribe records another son, Ishmael.¹ We refer to *three entrances* in the north, south, and east to the first Temple at Jerusalem built by King Solomon, when the detailed description of the Temple at Jerusalem recorded in the First Book of Kings mentions only one entrance, in the east.² Indeed, the entire legend of the Third Degree has no basis in the Hebrew Scriptures, but is derived from the initiatory rites of the ancient pagan mysteries. We must always bear in mind that it is not the purpose of Freemasonry to teach history, either Hebrew or Islamic. Rather, as will be mentioned later, it is the lesson enshrined in the allegory containing the deep truth and the profound meaning that is communicated to our initiates. That is the sole objective of our Rites and Ceremonies.³

At the outset it might be instructive to define the terms '*allegory*' and '*symbol*.' An **allegory** is a story with a lesson – a metaphor, a veiled representation often illustrating exemplary conduct on the part of its principal character. The Biblical parables are perhaps the most familiar examples. A **symbol** is a visible or graphic representation of an object or thing to convey a certain concept or idea. Symbols are powerful because of what they mean. We are surrounded by symbols – highway signs, gender distinctions, regulations. Musical notation represents sounds for the musician and numbers represent quantities for the mathematician. This note is written in letters forming words and phrases conveying ideas. All are symbols.

Most Masonic writers warn of the dangers implicit in any study of symbolism and urge caution in the interpretation of those symbols specific to Freemasonry. Bro. Colin F.W. Dyer writes in *Symbolism in Craft Masonry* (1983): "*There is no doubt that many men see meanings in different aspects of Freemasonry which others do not – symbolism can be very subjective.*"⁴

The framers of our Ritual drew heavily on our rich 'traditional' history based upon legends, many of which were adopted and adapted from ancient initiatory orders. Bro.

¹ Genesis Chapters 16 & 22

² 1 Kings Chapter 6, v. 8

³ A full discussion of this topic may be found in *Beyond The Pillars: More Light on Freemasonry*. Second Edition 1999, an authorized publication of Grand Lodge. Chapter 7: The Credibility Gap in Masonic Ritual.

⁴ Colin F. W. Dyer (1910-1987)

Albert Pike wrote: “*The value of the legend consists in the lessons which it inculcates. Truths are concealed in and symbolized by the legend and the myth.*”⁵

Symbols are a means to an end. It is not the purpose of Freemasonry to teach the meaning of symbols: the sole purpose of symbolism is **to teach Freemasonry**. Thus, it is important what these symbols teach. Symbols point to the fundamental principles we espouse and those ultimate values we strive to attain through Freemasonry – virtue, morality, and truth. The Junior Warden informs the Candidate at his Initiation that, “*every character, figure and emblem has a moral tendency and serves to inculcate the practice of virtue in all its genuine professors.*” The General Charge reminds us that “*A calm inquiry into the beauty of wisdom and virtue, and the study of moral geometry constitute the chief employments in the tyled recesses of the lodge.*” In this sense, it is obvious that the symbolism of Freemasonry is inseparable from the philosophy of Freemasonry. In an essay entitled The Symbolism of Freemasonry (1869), Bro. Albert G. Mackey wrote: “*To study the symbolism of Masonry is the only way to investigate its philosophy.*”⁶

The lodge room itself is a symbol of the universe. While its physical form is patterned after the mediaeval guild halls of our operative brethren, which in turn copied the form of the monks’ quire in the great abbeys, cathedrals and monasteries they constructed in stone, our lodges are symbols of that “*temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*” We are told that our lodges stand on holy ground. Three references are given from Biblical history citing events that occurred on holy Mount Moriah, the site of the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite. But what is the symbolical significance of “*holy ground*” in this context? The Sacred Writings admonish us to remember the sacred duty of every man who has knelt at the Altar of Masonry: “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God ... for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.*”⁷

Sir Alfred Robbins, writing in English-Speaking Freemasonry (1930), explained the transition: “*When the operative phase gradually and almost insensibly merged into the speculative and a simple passed into a sophisticated age, more was required. The employment side died away but the ethical remained; and from a fraternity of workers emerged a brotherhood of men. Every member was regarded as a stone to be hewn and carved and polished, fit for the hand of the Eternal Builder.*”⁸

⁵ Pike, Albert (1809-1891) **Morals and Dogma**. p. 210.

⁶ Dr. Albert G. Mackey (1807-1881) prolific American Masonic writer

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3, vv. 16-17

⁸ Sir Alfred Robbins (1856-1931)

It has often been stated that the whole of Freemasonry, the essence of its philosophy, is symbolized by the ashlar – rough and perfect – that are conspicuously placed in every Masonic lodge room in this jurisdiction ‘*for the Brethren to moralize on.*’ As the individual cultivates his intellectual ability and improves himself – the progression from darkness toward light – he moves from the north east angle where he began the journey, polishing and refining his character as he proceeds through life guided by Masonic ideas and ideals, toward the south east angle where his journey through life will end in perfection. That is the purpose of the great allegorical lessons of Freemasonry. The central point in all of this, of which we must never lose sight, is the profound meaning of Freemasonry embodied within and transmitted by these legends. Whether they are historically accurate or factually true, is immaterial.

RSJD March 2014