

**Masonic Initiation**  
**The Business in which We are Engaged**

**by**  
**Thomas D. Worrel**

**Presented to**  
**The Philalethes Society and the Phylaxis Society**  
**Joint Symposium**  
**August 27, 2011**  
**San Francisco, California**

**Masonic Initiation**  
**The Business in which We are Engaged**  
**by**  
**Thomas D. Worrel**

Introduction

Preliminary remarks

Process of Initiation

What is initiation?

The Journey towards perfection

The Mystery Schools and Freemasonry

Emergence of the Mysteries in Antiquity

Variety of Mystery Schools

Destruction and disappearance of the Mysteries

Key Common Characteristics with Freemasonry

Secrecy-Oaths-Brotherhood

Things Recited, Things Shown & Things Performed

The Four Cardinal Virtues

The Tracing Boards

The Third Degree

Conclusion

# **Masonic Initiation: The Business in which We are Engaged**

**by Thomas D. Worrel**

## **Introduction**

In antiquity, the stewards of various traditions of initiation organized themselves into what was called the Mysteries. These groups sought to perpetuate ritual techniques and spiritual concepts that fostered experiences that by several reports deepened spiritual insight into the meaning of life and death. These organizations considered themselves to be in possession of a special knowledge – and it could only be transmitted to others by special means. From the historical evidence that has survived and of which we are aware, the Mysteries were quite specific and intentional regarding what the initiates were to experience. Also from historical sources it is clear that they were adept in crafting powerful rites that brought their initiates to profound revelations and a broader and deeper vision of reality.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of any connection of these ancient Mystery cults and the Fraternity of Freemasonry has been debated continuously almost from the Craft's inception. For anyone educated in both Freemasonry and the Mysteries, it would be difficult for that question not to arise. Different conclusions have been reached and in some circles it is quite a controversy. This paper will not seek to resolve this dispute. It does attempt to clarify why there is one. The controversy exists because there are common elements, in fact striking similarities, between these societies. Central to each organization is the ritual process. Central to each is the importance of initiation. I hope to show it is more than any chance phenomenon of similarity. There are, I believe, undeniable parallels in the structure that each organization utilizes to manifest the experience of initiation.

Whether there is any possibility of some secret historical chain of succession, or that the original architects of Freemasonry consciously intended to institute these parallels, or even whether there is some kind of psychological explanation of their recurrence as religious phenomena must be addressed elsewhere. But before leaving this point, one has to cast extreme doubt on these parallels existing by chance alone. It is clear that Freemasonry was devised or developed into or became a society whose purpose was to initiate its members. This was the very same reason for the existence of the ancient Mystery schools.

## **The Process of Initiation**

The Mystery cults were schools of initiation. The same is true of Freemasonry. What is initiation and how is it, the business in which we are

engaged? First, what do we mean by initiation? The word comes from a Latin word (*initium*) meaning “a new beginning”. The Greek word used (*telein*) means “to accomplish” or even more interesting: “to make perfect”. Initiation usually refers to a body of rites and oral teachings designed to produce a positive change in the life of the initiate, sometimes a change in their consciousness, and sometimes even a radical change in their spiritual status. The novice emerges from his or her ordeal a somewhat different being, and in some cases, a very different being.<sup>2</sup> This experience of a new life or at least seeing life in a new way is taken so seriously in some traditions that the initiated is given or takes on a new name.

Reports have greatly varied regarding the value and result of the initiation itself. Most reports indicate a feeling that something important and sacred was imparted to them as they participated in the ritual. Some have reported that profound spiritual insights occurred to them during the rites. And in exceptional cases the initiates were moved into visionary and other mystical states of consciousness.<sup>3</sup> There are reports that the effects of these more profound experiences included two interesting results: direct knowledge (not just belief) of the reality of the Divine and the certitude of the immortality of the soul; which are, of course, the answers of two crucial questions posed to all petitioners of the Masonic Fraternity.

### **The Journey towards Perfection**

The term “initiation” is used in a few ways: first, it can refer to the initial rite of access to a society, secondly, it can refer to the actual rituals and practices of such a society; and third, it can refer to the result of initiation itself. Initiation, then, is the beginning of a new life as well as an explanation of the means and stages of growth therein, to the final perfecting, or reaching the fullness of being in that new life.

We can look at human nature in a static sense and speak just of our “being” but we can also look upon it in a dynamic way and speak of our “becoming”. Consider a candidate in his natural state as a crude block of rough stone. Then, consider the process of initiation as the means of becoming the perfectly dressed stone of due proportion now suitable for a higher purpose. An observation of nature shows us many similar growth patterns. Sometimes we see remarkable changes from one stage to another. For example, the incredible transformation of a caterpillar into the chrysalis and then to the emergence of a completely new form of a butterfly – surely one of nature’s most dazzling displays of power. These powers of transformation active within nature are present all around us. It seems to be the contention of the ancient initiatory schools that there is a corresponding power working within human nature. The intent of initiatory rites and symbols is to somehow stimulate or activate these latent

transforming powers. The one initiated changes into or gains access to a “higher” nature. Or using traditional language, this change is equivalent to dying to the old and being reborn. You cannot remain the same and become better. Death therefore is the metaphorical door and thus many of the initiatory myths concern themselves with a death scenario. These myths usually portray the death of the cult hero and then that hero being raised into a new life.

So initiation is the entire process towards perfection from the initial spark of realization of our human potential to the development of these capacities inherent within human nature, to the fulfillment of the shared destiny of our human spirit.

### **The Mystery Cults and Freemasonry**

What do we mean by Mystery schools, Mystery cults or the Mysteries? These words are interchangeable. They were schools because people went to them to learn a special knowledge. They were cults in the proper and positive sense of the word because they were usually centered upon a particular divine figure. The original meaning of the term “Mystery” (*mysterion* in Greek) is derived from a Greek verb meaning “to close” as in closing the lips or eyes.<sup>4</sup> Because there were vows of silence imposed upon the initiate regarding their experience this term became common when referring to these special cults.

Without knowing the exact details of what happened in the sanctuary of the Mysteries, I still think it would be difficult for the Freemason not to feel some sympathetic chord being sounded here. Since Mystery schools kept the rituals secret, an aspirant to the Mysteries did not just show up and gain complete access to their teachings. Secret initiation rituals were a prerequisite to membership. These were also organizations completely separate from the common religious practices of the people of any particular area. Like Freemasonry, it is not accurate to call them a religion.<sup>5</sup> The Mysteries were extra-curricular; they were above and beyond normal religious behavior.

### **Emergence of the Mysteries in Antiquity:**

It is not clear what instigated the Mysteries in the beginning. Many mystery cults were active in the Mediterranean region prior to the Hellenistic age and remained active till the rise of the Christian age. We know that the cult of Eleusis prospered at least from the sixth century B.C. and around that time other cults emerged and flourished as well.<sup>6</sup> There were sanctuaries all over the Greco-Roman world. Some of the Mysteries had a central location where they met but others did not seem to have any special meeting place at all.

### **Variety of Mystery Schools:**

There were several different Mystery Cults throughout the Greco-Roman world. The major ones include the Greek Mysteries of Dionysus and those of Demeter of the Eleusinian rites, the Anatolian Great Mother cult, the Roman Mithraic fraternity, and the Egyptian Mysteries of Isis and Osiris. But there were others, several others in fact.<sup>7</sup> Most of the Mysteries were open to both genders. Some were not; for example, the cult of Mithras was only open to males. This particular cult was quite widespread and there were sanctuaries from the British Isles to the Middle East. They all had secret rituals but how many varied among the Mysteries. For example, the Eleusinian Mysteries seemed to have only two while the cult of Mithras had seven degrees.

### **Destruction and disappearance of the Mysteries:**

True to form, the Mystery schools rose up out of obscurity, grew to prominence, diminished and died. One of the main reasons for their demise was the rise of a competing spirituality, i.e. Christianity. One crucial difference between them was that the Mystery cults were inclusive as regarding the several religions around them while Christianity was not. The decline of the Mysteries inversely corresponded to the rise and growing prominence of this new religion.

Basically as conversion took place throughout the Roman Empire, the Christian minority quickly became a dominant religion. When the two Roman emperors, Constantine and Licinius, issued the famous Edict of Milan in 313 that legalized all religious worship including Christianity more conversion took place especially among the higher classes. A succeeding emperor Theodosius recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. And about a decade later in 391 C.E. pagan practices were outlawed.<sup>8</sup> The Mysteries simply and suddenly disappeared. And by most scholarly accounts the Mysteries were obliterated.<sup>9</sup> But being so closely aligned with the way of nature, maybe these schools were destined to rise again.

### **Common Characteristics of Freemasonry and the Mysteries**

There are several common characteristics between the Mysteries and the rites of Freemasonry. The three most basic and well-known similarities are the practice of secrecy, the taking of vows and the strong sense of brotherhood among members.

## **Secrecy – Vows – Brotherhood:**

The most apparent feature is the secrecy in which both groups shroud both their rites and the specifics of what these rites convey to their members. In fact, the Mysteries were so successful in their demands of confidentiality that historians have been hampered in their attempts of reconstructing any complete picture of their activities.

Directly related to the practice of secrecy is another shared characteristic - the use of oaths. They are utilized not only to secure this secrecy but also to promote the virtues in the initiate. The use of vows and oaths in these private rites are found in the oldest reports. In fact, the making of a vow is considered one of the oldest religious expressions of mankind.<sup>10</sup> There are two surviving documents from the cult of Isis of the oath of secrecy used in an initiation ceremony.<sup>11</sup> The oath was made upon the personal deity of the candidate and not the cult itself. Walter Burkert, a contemporary scholar of Mystery cults explains this practice: "The 'mystery oath'... is built on the foundations of a previous and lasting religious attachment to the 'gods I actually worship.' This, ... is the absolute opposite of 'conversion' ... There is no unsettling or destroying of personality in mystery initiations of this kind, but rather a deepening or extending of preexisting piety through a new intimacy with the divine in both familiar and novel shapes."<sup>12</sup>

Another very striking parallel is the concept of brotherhood fostered through participation in the Mysteries. Burkert explains: "The term 'brother,' *adelphos*, is used ... for those who receive initiation together. ... (and) Plato's Seventh Letter refers to the uncommonly close ties of friendship that develop through hospitality and common participation in the mysteries. ... There are *symbola* to enable the *mystai* to recognize each other; this may lead to some kind of familiarity even between strangers."<sup>13</sup> I do not think it is difficult to see a common thread here between the Mysteries of antiquity and modern Freemasonry.

## **Things Recited, Things Shown & Things Performed**

The nature of the Mysteries has left historians speculating and piecing together the best they can from what evidence remains to us. Being shrouded in secrecy, protected by severe oaths and bound by remarkable ties of brotherhood has left historians with many questions that may never be answered satisfactorily. But there are certain other fundamental things beyond the secrecy, oaths and fraternity that reveal very interesting aspects of the Mysteries confirming even more common ground with Freemasonry. Marvin Meyer of Chapman College, another scholar of the Mysteries, informs us that: "In the Eleusinian mysteries the *mystai* participated in rites that incorporated three types

of sacred observances: *legomena*, “things recited,” *deiknymena*, “things shown,” and *dromena*, “things performed.” Although these three categories of communication apply particularly to the mysteries of Demeter and Kore, they may be employed to describe the rites of the other mystery religions as well.”<sup>14</sup>

These categories refer to special handling of the things recited, things shown and things performed. Meyer gives us a more elaborate explanation of each category:

*“ ... of the mysteries were statements recited to express the deep truths of the gods. ... The legomena may have been recitations of the hieros logos (the “sacred account” that provided the mythological foundation for the celebration of the mysteries; ..., interpretations of the stories of the deities, or responses of the initiates to the divine mystery. ... the mystai beheld the deiknymena. The mysteries were replete with visual images, and the sanctuaries, where the holy initiations were held frequently housed numerous works of art. ... Presumably the beholding of the “things shown” also meant that the initiates saw sacred objects previously hidden from sight. ... The dromena may have included a variety of rituals, ... a drama mystikon (mystic drama) a theatrical performance in which the hieroi logoi of the mystery religions came to life in liturgical drama.”<sup>15</sup>*

The next question might be if we can find similar or parallel things heard, seen or done in Freemasonry? As regards the activities within the Masonic mysteries, one only needs to point out the things recited such as prayers, the charges, the lectures and explanations of symbols; the things witnessed such as the different lodge scenes, the covering, furniture, ornaments, lights and jewels of the lodge, and of course the hieroglyphic emblems. And the third category of things performed such as the actions of the officers, and the drama of each degree. Here I will only discuss one example for each of the categories: the Four Cardinal Virtues, the Tracing Boards, and the Master Mason ritual.

### **The Four Cardinal Virtues:**

The selection of only four particular virtues and declaring them to be the four cardinal virtues was presented as early as Plato (429 – 347 B.C.E.) in several of his writings.<sup>16</sup> As a reminder, cardinal means fundamentally important and essential. Thus, the four cardinal virtues should be considered of utmost importance. It should also be noted that an older definition of cardinal is that it is something upon which other things depend. I do not think it is any coincidence that the four cardinal virtues are presented to the candidate of Freemasonry in the instructions following the declaration that he has become a mason. Josef Pieper, a scholar on the subject of virtues makes the comment: “... that team of four, the basic virtues, which... can enable man to attain the furthest potentialities of his nature.”<sup>17</sup> That is a comment worthy of the deepest consideration.

Is there a specific reason for their placement in the very first rite of Freemasonry? Pieper's explains the purpose of these four cardinal virtues: "... is to clear a trail, to open a way."<sup>18</sup> Listen to Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* (A dialogue on the immortality of the soul): "... Temperance and Justice, Fortitude, and Prudence, are a kind of preliminary purification."<sup>19</sup> These are not just nice virtues to possess. These are key virtues. Philosophers like Plato lauded and Thomas Aquinas extensively expanded the doctrine of these specific virtues. These virtues are means to the ultimate purpose, to the ultimate good, the *Summum Bonum*.

Another important aspect of these four cardinal virtues was that each one unfolded one another. In fact, it was argued that the virtue of prudence is the mother or origin of all virtues and each subsequent virtue evolves out of the previous one.<sup>20</sup> Each of the cardinal virtues has three degrees of perfection.<sup>21</sup> Perfecting these virtues perfects the human being, perfects the human soul. In their own right, they are a means of ascension. It is no coincidence that the Four Cardinal Virtues are where they are in the Masonic system. This doctrine of virtue not only begins the purification process but also crafts the soul of man to its moral perfection. The doctrine of the Four Cardinal Virtues is but one example of what is recited and heard in the Halls of Freemasonry.

### **The Tracing Boards of Freemasonry:**

There are several rituals within the Craft of Freemasonry and at least in theory, there is (or can be) a "tracing board" for each. These boards are actual drawings or paintings on a canvas or board depicting upon each an assembly of the symbolism related to that particular ritual. Masonic rites are designed to take an individual through several successive ritual encounters. These encounters are designed to be instructive in various areas of human experience. Going through a Masonic rite is analogous to swimming in a sea of specific symbolism or like taking an herbal bath soaking in certain healing properties. So when you subsequently study a particular tracing board, it at least recalls the key elements of that ritual experience. The tracing board provides the observer with a method or way to keep the specific ritual elements in unison and facilitates a deeper exploration of their meaning. The Tracing Boards are just some of the things seen and observed in the Halls of Freemasonry.

### **The Third Degree:**

The third degree of Freemasonry is that of Master Mason and is considered by most masons (I would speculate) to be the central ritual drama of our Craft. It would certainly fall into the category of the *drama mystikon* (mystic drama) in which the "mythological foundation for the celebration of the mysteries

came to life in liturgical drama".<sup>22</sup> It is also a ritual that deals with life's greatest mystery – death. This ritual would alone link our Craft to some of the mystery schools of antiquity because, as I mentioned earlier, the theme of death and rebirth is common to initiation rituals all over the world.<sup>23</sup> One could find several accounts from ancient sources linking the experience of physical death with the experience of the deepest initiation. I think that most Master Masons would agree. Without discussing the particulars of the Third Degree one can still understand it somewhat by going back to the corresponding tracing boards. In a comparison of the various Third Degree Tracing Boards one cannot help but notice the overriding depiction of a spiritual temple within the depths of the tomb. The Third Degree of Master Mason is one of, if not the most profound, of the mystic dramas experienced in the Halls of Freemasonry.

## **Conclusion**

Like the Mystery schools of antiquity, Freemasonry takes candidates through the process of initiation. Then as now, initiation intends to activate within us the powers that bring about our perfection – that is, the completion of what we are meant to be. We have to exercise our Craft to accomplish this. Although we fancy ourselves speculative masons, obviously our craft is not a building trade in the usual meaning; our craft is the ritual. Through the workings of our Craft we transform the rough ashlar into the perfect ashlar. In conclusion I want to close with a statement that I once used to open a previous another paper:

*We must never lose sight of the high destiny of our Fraternity lest we cut ourselves off from the very roots of our life-blood. And our roots are dug deep in the Mystery Schools of Antiquity whose purpose was to initiate candidates.*

And thus let us never forget the business in which we are engaged.

## **Endnotes**<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*

<sup>3</sup> Burkert, p. 89 and following.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Burkert, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Shaw, *Theurgy of the Soul*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Burkert, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Burkert, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: *The Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *The Symposium*

<sup>17</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 69c.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> Meyer, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Burkert, pp. 99-100.

---

## Bibliography

Burkert, Walter, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Clauss, Manfred, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Richard Gordon, trans., New York: Routledge, (1990), 2001.

Finegan, Jack, *Myth & Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989.

Guthrie, W.K.C., *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, (1952) 1993.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2005.

Martin, Luther H., *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Meyer, Marvin W. ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

Pieper, Josef, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, University of Notre Dame Press (1954) 1966.

Plato, *The Phaedo*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (internet edition).

Shaw, Gregory, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

Ulansey, David, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology & Salvation in the Ancient World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.