

THE INITIATIC SYMBOLISM OF FREEMASONRY

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Freemasonry continues an initiatic tradition whose beginnings are lost in antiquity. This statement cannot be proven historically. Yet the more you study Masonic rites and its symbols, the more you become convinced that you are dealing with something ancient, maybe even primordial. It becomes clear that this tradition is much older than Masonry's institutional beginnings in 1717, older than the cathedral builders and medieval guilds, older even than King Solomon's Temple or the Egyptian Pyramids.

It is not easy to define what Freemasonry is. Any definition would be inadequate, because Masonry has a deeply individual meaning to each member of the fraternity. No doctrine is expounded inside the lodge; there are no sermons, no interpretations. Even though teachings are incorporated within the rites, the meanings and interpretations are for the most part left to the candidate, whose task it is to integrate them into his own past and future life.

An initiate's personal involvement with Masonry may change during his lifetime as well. For some it may be just a social club, a charitable institution, or a way of promoting education and the arts and sciences. For others it may also be a way of probing for the deepest truths.

The basic entry point into Freemasonry in the U.S. is called the Blue Lodge. Its function is to work the first three degrees: Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. These three degrees initiate one into the fraternity, convey how to improve oneself in Masonry, and communicate the

central legend of the Craft. The symbols, signs, gestures, and legends of Freemasonry are all crafted into ritual dramas whose apparent aim is to instruct the candidate about various spiritual themes.

After a man becomes a Master Mason, he may seek membership in other Masonic bodies, such as the York or Scottish Rites. The rituals of these various Masonic bodies are presented in an ordered fashion whereby one advances by degree. The degree work is structured to shed more and more light on the tradition for the aspirant. Different Masonic bodies are custodians of the different degrees; they must know the ritual and enact it at the appropriate time for the candidate's benefit.

Freemasonry makes allegoric use of the building of King Solomon's Temple, much as St. Theresa of Avila used the motif of entering the "interior castle," St. John of the Cross spoke of ascending Mt. Carmel, and the Kabbalist uses the image of climbing the Tree of Life. A ritual allows the participant to experience the truth of these teachings. A serious look at Masonic symbolism reveals a true tradition of initiation.

The symbolism presented to us through images, allegories, rituals, and myths. Masonic symbolism largely consists of the principles and practices of temple building. The working tools of gavel, gauge, plumb, level, and trowel all have symbolic meanings; so do the designing tools of square and compass.

Symbolism is the language of the soul; as such it could be called the "angelic language," because by means of it the soul communicates with its own deepest nature. Communicating with this deepest nature is the most important duty one owes to oneself. There are many mysteries to human existence, and we use symbols in order to gain admission to those hidden treasures. Masonic tradition is rich in this area; its symbolism comes not only from Western civilization but from the East as well. In discussing it, we must draw upon sources from many lands and from many times.

Since Masonry carries on a tradition rather than the teachings of any one person or set doctrine, it transcends any single organization. It has points of similarity with many traditions. Both legend and fact have placed the Masonic fraternity in the same spheres as the alchemists, Rosicrucians, Kabbalists, and Hermeticists; the fraternities of Hermes and Pythagoras; the ancient mystery schools; the Essenes; the Comacines; the Knights Templars;

and of course the cathedral and temple builders. Regardless of the truth of these associations, Masonry is an initiatory society whose main aim is to safeguard the mysteries and hand them down to worthy aspirants in future ages.

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A ritual allows the participant to experience the truth of these teachings symbolically, because every sense impression and corresponding idea reflects the Mystery being communicated. The ritual, done seriously and formally, will constellate the archetypal contents of the unconscious. To become aware of the archetypes is to get in touch with the deepest aspects of our nature.

Freemasonry is set up in such a way that even application for membership conforms to its symbolic purpose. The candidate must meet certain requirements before applying. He must be an adult, and he must not be a slave or a dependent. This is crucial psychologically, and means that one must possess a certain degree of maturity and independence before becoming a Mason.

The candidate must also petition for membership; he cannot be solicited, but must ask of his own free will and accord. In addition to these preliminary qualifications, the lodge must find him to be worthy of admittance; that is, the candidate must through his own efforts and nature be an upright and moral person.

Psychologically, the procedure preparing one for Masonic affiliation corresponds with the ego's first glimmerings of a higher destiny. This event in one's life, that of turning towards the Light, can be likened to the Annunciation, when the angel says to the Virgin: "You have been chosen." A seed has been planted in the aspirant's soul. This state is very important, for it entails an initial longing for a more spiritual life. The impulse really originates from our deepest self. In Freemasonry, we are taught that the first preparation for initiation is in our heart.

If the petitioner is accepted for membership, he must present himself at the lodge. All degree work (ritual) and advancement are done within the lodge or temple. The temple is considered a replica of the divine world, a sacred space. Therefore it must reflect the divine world by being built to the proportions of the divine; this is why sacred geometry is such an important area of study. Built to correct proportions, the lodge represents the ideal and eternal temple. The temple is a place qualitatively different from other places on earth. It is the symbolic center of the world, the place where all the worlds meet.

In Masonry, the lodge represents the Temple of Solomon. It is said to be oblong in shape and situated due east and west. Its ground floor is a mosaic pavement of black and white. This is emblematic of the world of duality in which we walk: night and day, good and evil, pain and pleasure, hot and cold, and so on. Its covering is the canopy of heaven. (The name "Blue Lodge" is said to allude to this canopy.)

The lodge is dedicated to St John, the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. The feasts of these two saints, are very near the solstices or extremes of the year, the former, being June 24, the latter December 27. Thus the lodge extends from sunrise to sunset and to the farthest reaches of north and south; its floor is the earth and its ceiling is the sky. The first degree of Masonry is called the Entered Apprentice. This is a rite of induction into the society. Some of the major symbols and ideas associated with this degree are: the two pillars, the lambskin apron, the rough and perfect ashlar, the northeast corner, the idea of facing the east, and the Three Great Lights.

As we are told in 2 Chron. 3:15-17, two pillars were set at the entrance to the Solomon's Temple. Symbolically they represent our experience of opposites, from which our everyday consciousness emerges. The same is

true of spiritual consciousness, though at a higher level: this idea is portrayed in Genesis as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Regarding it, the serpent said to Eve: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). First we must pass through the spiritual pillars, then our eyes shall be opened. When we open our eyes, we go from darkness to light. In this light we become conscious of the spiritual dimension of life.

The lambskin apron is one of the best-known symbols of Masonry, representing innocence. One wears an apron to keep from getting dirty while working. The Masonic candidate receives his lambskin apron upon his initiation. Again this can be seen as alluding to Genesis: after Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons" (Gen. 3:7). This story also portrays man's awakening to a spiritual dimension: "Ye shall be as gods." The Mason receives his apron upon beginning his quest for Light, just as Adam and Eve fashioned aprons upon their quest to become wise.

Other symbols associated with Masonic initiation include the two blocks of stone: the rough and the perfect ashlar. These are symbols of transformation. The rough ashlar is the stone quarried in its rude and natural state. A perfect ashlar is one that has been worked on by the tools of the Craft. The candidate is compared to the rough ashlar, the "rude stone." By going through the initiation, that is, by being worked on by the tools of the Craft, he undergoes a change in his being to become the perfect ashlar or "dressed stone." Initiation accelerates the candidate's progress on the spiritual path.

Another symbol in Masonic initiation is the cornerstone, which is traditionally placed in the northeast corner. The cornerstone is the first stone placed on the ground when a building's foundation is laid, usually accompanied by some ceremony. Obviously, then, the cornerstone is a perfect symbol for the beginning of the work of initiation. The compass point of the northeast is highly symbolic, for in the northern hemisphere, the north has been traditionally seen as the place of darkness. The east is known as the source of the light. Therefore the northeast corner stands midway between darkness and light. We can conclude, then, that the cornerstone in the northeast corner of the temple symbolizes the center of the universe, where all the worlds have their meeting point. It is

also the place in the lodge that is closest to the Worshipful Master, whose position is in the east.

The direction of east is important in Masonry, as it is in many religions. Masons are admonished to face the east. The point where the sun rises has from the remotest time symbolized spiritual illumination. It represents the source of the Light and, again, the awakening to the spiritual world. The Freemason seeking more light therefore travels east in his journey. The idea of longing for more light is emblematic of longing for more awareness. We seek that Light which is the source of our life.

In the Nativity, we can see a parallel between the life of Christ and Masonic initiation. The Christ child is born in the humble surroundings of a stable, and he is destitute. The candidate for initiation finds himself in a similar condition. In Jungian terms, the central archetype of the Self cannot express itself through the person unless there is sufficient humility. A personality that is inflated has no room for anything else, especially the Self.

The “Three Great Lights” of Masonry are the Holy Bible, Square, and Compass; every lodge must be furnished with these. The association of the Bible with the square and compass upon the altar of Freemasonry reminds us of the placement of the letter “G” with these same tools as a symbol of the revelation of God. As I’ve mentioned before, Masonic symbology is predominantly biblical. An open copy of the Bible must be on the altar or a Lodge cannot initiate candidates, for the Book is an indispensable part of its furniture. The presence of the holy writings also shows an insight into human psychology: the power of our heritage should not be underestimated. The Bible has been one of the foundations of Western culture. Our psychology, like Masonic symbolism, is steeped in biblical themes and imagery.

Notwithstanding this use of biblical imagery, the Craft does not propound any particular religion. The Bible, like the other furnishings of the Temple, is a symbol. Although it may seem that the Bible is the focus of the Craft to an outsider, one would be wrong to think that its presence is meant to exclude other great traditions, respect for which has always characterized the spirit of Freemasonry. Even a cursory examination of Masonic rituals reveals deep influence from Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and Kabbalistic sources. Moreover candidates are permitted to have other sacred writings than the Bible present. The most public symbol of Freemasonry is the interlaced

square and compass surrounding the letter “G.” In one sense this image also depicts the union of opposites. One interpretation holds that the square represents earth and the compass represents heaven. Looking at the whole symbol, we know that the square is used to make angles and the compass arcs; “G,” symbolizing geometry, is that which unifies them. The use of geometry within initiatory schools is well known. We could also say that by application of the tools of the Craft, we begin our journey into the inner recesses of Nature, because the tools surround the initial of an unknown word.

The meaning of the “G” is still debated in certain circles. It has been variously interpreted as meaning geometry, God, gematria, and sometimes just as silence, because in the English language the “g” is sometimes silent, as in “gnosis.” It was once equated with the Hebrew letter ך, yod, which is considered to be the basis for every other letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Because the word yod literally means “hand,” some schools associate this letter with the sense of touch, the foundation of all the other senses. Yod is also the first letter of the Tetragrammaton or four lettered Name of God, which is, according to Jewish tradition, unpronounceable. So we can easily see that this symbol is a particularly cogent one for the Great Architect of the Universe.

The square is a symbolic tool that Masons are encouraged to apply to their life, to “square” their actions. As the geometric square is a right angle and informs us of what is in true relation, so in every situation we are to apply the square, that is, to find the right and true relationship there. This implies a moral law inherent in all experience. The compass is a tool that Masons are encouraged to apply symbolically by circumscribing desires and passions. Circumscribing means to draw limits. Effective action is a discipline. Too many desires disperse our energy and allow us to accomplish nothing. There has to be a focus to our lives; we have to be able to decide which of our natural desires best fit our purpose and should therefore be nourished. Obviously this refers to our ability to check our natural passions. This idea does not imply denial; it is meant more to convey the idea of appropriate action.

Therefore the Three Great Lights of Masonry are guiding symbols. The quest for Light begins with the Scripture, the holy writings of our ancestors. But like the “G,” which is just the initial of the name of God, it is only the beginning. While our concept of God has its roots in the Bible, this concept

cannot be static; it must be dynamic. It expands as our capacity for Light increases.

As the First Degree is the portal to the Mysteries of Freemasonry, the Second Degree speaks to the methods by which one progresses in the sacred science. In a sense this is a rite of integration into the Masonic work. One means of increasing our capacity for Light is given to Masons in the symbol of the staircase, a central motif of the Fellowcraft degree. More specifically, the symbol is the winding staircase of three, five, and seven steps. The staircase is a symbol of ascension, of going from below to above. A staircase leads from a lower room to an upper room. Within a temple, the staircase symbolizes an advance or ascent from one mode of being to the next. It also recalls the biblical image of Jacob's ladder.

The three steps represent the threefold aspects of much of Masonry: the Three Great Lights, the three degrees, and the three principal officers. The five steps allude to the five orders of architecture, as well as the five senses. The seven steps refer to the seven liberal arts and sciences, known in the Middle Ages as the *trivium* and *quadrivium*: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Obviously there are more arts and sciences than these, but using the number seven is common when the intention is to encompass all things within their scope. But there are deeper and more esoteric meanings implied in this teaching of applying oneself to the mastery of these seven arts. During the Middle Ages it was thought that learning about the natural world through the seven liberal arts was a way to wisdom.

The staircase can represent both an ascent to the sacred and a point of access to the mystery of death. This idea brings us to the ordeal of the initiatory death, which we will encounter in the Third Degree, that of Master Mason. Here the candidate encounters the legend of the Craft hero, Hiram Abiff. Hiram was the architect of King Solomon's Temple. As the Masonic legend relates, before the Temple was finished, a conspiracy was launched to extort the secrets of a Master Mason from Hiram, thereby securing the Master's Word. Because of Hiram's fidelity to the Craft, he did not reveal the secrets and was murdered. After some time his body was found and raised by King Solomon, the embodiment of wisdom. But the tradition says that when Hiram was murdered, the Master's Word was lost; thus the Temple remains unfinished. The Master Mason travels from west to east in search of the Lost Word, whose discovery will bring the Temple to completion.

In many traditions, the ordeals of initiation have included a variety of ceremonial depictions and sometimes physically arduous trials. One of the most prominent initiatory themes is the ritual death, burial, and rebirth of the central hero. Sometimes the candidate takes the role of the hero and ceremonially enters a vault or is even placed in a coffin. The symbolic death is a return to the primordial state, to the state before birth. Afterward the candidate is brought back to the world of the living. This new birth brings about a new condition and adds a spiritual value to this life that was not apparent before the ordeal. By becoming aware of this new state, a shifting of values usually occurs, and with it new commitments are taken on.

Those familiar with the psychological process of individuation will see many parallels with the ordeals and goals of the rites of initiation. Jungian research has helped us understand the role that symbolism plays in the individuation of the psyche. Certain symbols emerge in the dreams, fantasies, and sometimes the artistic expressions of the individual at critical psychological junctures. Very similar symbols are used in religious and initiatory rites to achieve a similar goal. Probably these rites have the effect of constellating the archetypes of the unconscious so that they may unleash their transformative power. We can consider it the psychological equivalent of that which triggers the transmutation of the caterpillar into the butterfly. In some spiritual traditions, the path of initiation ultimately leads to the mystical union. There are many symbols that represent this state of spiritual perfection, but one of the best is simply the *stone*. There are also many symbols that represent the experience of spiritual perfection; one of the best is simply the *Light*.

The stone has become an archetypal image of the eternal and absolute reality. Back to the remotest times, we can find references connecting stones with the gods. There are numerous myths of gods such as Mithras being born from the stone or emerging from it. Stones possess the qualities of stability, solidity, and everlastingness, which are also qualities attributed to the gods. Numerous references throughout the Bible allude to a link between the stone and the sacred (Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22-24; Acts 4:11; Rev. 2:17). The stone also has a Kabbalistic meaning. In Hebrew the word for “father” is AB (ab), while the word for “son” is BN (ben). If we combine the letters of the two words merging the Father and the Son—the word ABN (eben) is formed, which is the Hebrew word for “stone.” Hence the *stone* is a Kabbalistic symbol for the mystical union of the soul with the Divine.

Numerology and geometry testify to this meaning as well. In the three-four-five right triangle, the ancient Egyptians attributed the three-unit vertical line to Osiris, the horizontal four-unit line to Isis, and the five-unit hypotenuse to their son Horus. Where the hypotenuse (the Son) meets the vertical (the Father), it always forms an angle of 53 degrees. By the technique of gematria, the Hebrew letters of ABN (eben or stone) add up to 53 (A = 1, B = 2, N = 50).

The stone is also seen as a perfect cube. From biblical accounts we know the Holy of Holies was cubical in both Solomon's Temple and the Tabernacle in the wilderness. So is the New Jerusalem mentioned in Rev. 21:16. Like the stone, the cube has a Kabbalistic meaning. The Hebrew letters referring to the unpronounceable Name of God are IHVH. By gematria, these letters add up to 26. Geometrically we can define a cube as a perfect solid having six equal faces, eight corners, and twelve equal edges, and $6 + 8 + 12 = 26$. Thus this number symbolically relates to the Divine Name. (IHVH = 26)

Those who have known the mystical union almost always report their experience in terms of light. Light symbolism is a cross-cultural phenomenon; compare our own terms "illumination" and "enlightenment." "Light" in Latin is LVX or lux; its three letters add up to 65. Related to the number 65 in the Hebrew is the word *haikal* (HIKL), which means "temple." Kabbalistically, then, the words "temple" and "light" are also related. In the tradition of Freemasonry, illumination is finding the Lost Word. Once this Word is recovered, the Temple is finished. And it is with living stones that the Temple of Light is built.