

Symbolism, The Hiramic Legend, and the Master's Word

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It sometimes seems that the foundation of all that has been written on any subject may be found in Plato. The careful Emerson says, "Plato only, is entitled to Omar's fanatical remark, 'Burn the libraries; for their value is in this book.'" In Plato's Phaedrus, we find the fundamental principles of public address, and one of the first principles given, is for the speaker to clearly define his terms in order that there be no misunderstanding or disagreement at the start.

I was very much impressed with Brother Gage's definition of Symbolism at the beginning of his talk on Symbolism of the First Degree, and it will probably be well for us to briefly review his definition. We may be able to make it clearer in our minds, or perhaps add some thought of value. Brother Gage dwelt upon the derivation and meaning of the word symbol. He found that the word came from the Greek, meaning to compare. A symbol is an expression of an idea by comparison. Abstract ideas are often best conveyed by comparison with concrete objects.

A symbol is also a sign, and the words sign and symbol are especially synonymous in their Masonic connection. The symbols of Masonry are the signs which guide the traveler along his journey through life and point to his destination. In olden times, when the weary pilgrims journeyed to the city of their desire--whether it was Mecca where the Mohammedans went to greet the rising sun, or Jerusalem where the Christians journeyed that they might walk upon the ground made holy by the foot-falls of the man of Nazareth--the signs along the way meant much to them. It is the same in Masonry. It is with a certain satisfaction and joy that we find these signs or symbols which point out the right road to travel and mark our moral and spiritual progress--much the same as the signs along the way, marked the pilgrim's progress in former times.

The study of these signs or symbols is called Symbolism, and the man who endeavors to find these signs in Masonry and to read them aright, is called a Symbolist. A Symbolist, in trying to understand the symbols of Masonry, not only benefits himself but he may also aid some other tired and weary pilgrim in his journey through life. Let us therefore, approach this subject of Symbolism in a thoughtful way; for if the symbols of Masonry are guide posts that will assist us in our earthly pilgrimage, then indeed, the effort is worth while.

In addition to defining Symbolism as the study of these signs in Masonry, let us also attempt to define Masonry. If each of us were handed a piece of paper and wrote a

definition of Masonry, we would probably be surprised at the various ideas. Let us then, as Plato suggests, agree upon a definition. It has been said that one of the best ways to clearly fix in the mind what anything is, is to find out some of the things which it is not. We should have no difficulty in agreeing that Masonry is not politics, although some of the recent activities in our fraternity make us feel that there are those among our number who are attempting to make a political organization of the fraternity. While might makes right, we will hear brethren boast of the political achievements of the Masonic Fraternity and encourage hatred and prejudice, but politics is not Masonry.

There is a very great difference between Masonry and the Masonic Fraternity. The Masonic Fraternity is made up of men who follow, or who are supposed to follow, the teachings of Masonry; but men are prone to err. The fraternity is apt to wander from the fundamental principles of Masonry, and the mistakes are due to the frailty of man and the errors of his judgment, rather than to the principles of Masonry. In speaking of Masonry therefore, both of its history and characteristics, I do not refer to the Masonic fraternity.

If Masonry then, is not the fraternity, what is it? In referring to our Illinois monitor, we find the following sentence in the Secretary's lecture, given in the ante-room before the candidate is admitted to the lodge: "Masonry consists of a course of ancient, hieroglyphic, moral instruction, taught agreeably to ancient customs by types, emblems, and allegorical figures." This is beautiful English, but is its full import immediately clear ?

The peculiar characters cut upon the rocks in the tombs of the ancient Egyptians are hieroglyphics. For many centuries they stood as the mute unknown secrets of ages past and gone. Modern researchers, however, successfully patched together and deciphered them, and the hieroglyphics and signs were finally read and understood. They were found to be clear pictorial representations of events and ideas, full of meaning-- but only to those who understood them. Masonry, being hieroglyphic, is taught by a system of signs or symbols which mean something to those who have studied them, but to others they mean nothing.

Why is Masonry hieroglyphic? Perhaps it is because of that old principle that something which we get for very little effort, is usually very little valued; but something for which we are required to expend more effort, we believe to be of more value. Just as the etymologist discovers the meaning of an old Egyptian hieroglyphic, after months of careful study and search; so do we find truth after careful thought. As our Ancient brother Pythagoras is said to have discovered the forty-seventh problem of Euclid, only after weary and tedious toil; so will we discover the secrets of Masonry only after we seek for them. Masonry, therefore, is hieroglyphic for the good reason founded upon a fundamental truth, that something which we get for nothing is worth nothing.

Masonry is moral, because it is in perfect accord with the established principles of truth--and that is real morality. We learn that this hieroglyphic, moral system is taught by types, emblems and allegorical figures. We speak of a man of a certain type, meaning that he has certain characteristics in common with men of the same class or type. Types are expressions of classification, by which we are able to fix general truths or characteristics in our minds and draw conclusions from them. Emblems are signs or symbols visible to the eye, which stand for something in

addition to themselves, and they create in the mind a flow of thought. The square, for instance, in all ages has been an emblem of Masonry, but its use has become so common that "to be on the square" has a meaning to others than Masons.

Allegories are parables. In seeking why Masonry is taught in allegories instead of by logical statements of truth in direct form, we may answer that in many ages truth has been taught by allegories and parables, in order that the mind may conceive great and fundamental truths by comparison with simple things. Some think that Masonry is taught by types, emblems, and allegorical figures in order to conceal the thought, but it seems to me that they reveal the truth and make it clear and understandable. In the wonderful parable of the Sower, we learn of the seed that fell on fertile ground, the seed that fell among thistles, and the seed that fell on the rocks and stony places. Does the parable conceal the thought? On the contrary, the parable or allegory makes the thought clear to the thinking mind, but only after a certain effort in thinking the thing through.

Call Masonry, then, a philosophy, a science, an art, or even a religion if you please, but retain the idea of a system of hieroglyphic moral instruction taught by types, emblems, and allegorical figures. In this sense Masonry is indeed ancient, and we may trace four ideas in this peculiar system through many ages. These four principle ideas might even be called Land-marks. They are: a belief in one God, a teaching of Immortality, a symbolic idea of building, and a seeking after something which was lost.

We find these characteristics in Masonry from the time of the Ancient Egyptians in the mysteries of Osiris, where it is said Moses was initiated into the solemn rites which antedated the return of the chosen people of God; in the old Persian Mysteries of Mithras, where we find traces of an unusually clear conception of a life after death; and in Syria where we find the Dionysian Mysteries which came from Greece and were probably carried by the workmen of Tyre into Jerusalem when Solomon's temple was built on Mount Moriah. We also find these four characteristics in the mysteries of Bacchus in early Rome; later in the Roman Collegia of Builders; and in the teachings of the peaceful Essenes along the Jordan, where some authorities conjecture that Jesus was initiated before the beginning of his ministry. In the middle ages we find this hieroglyphic moral system taught by types, emblems and allegories, among the Cathedral Builders; in the dark ages, we find it among the Comacine Masters on the little island in Lake Como; and we may trace it through the guilds of travelling Masons, to the Speculative Masonry of 1717, which we substantially teach today.

Our Iconoclastic friends, who are interested in the history of the fraternity, may smile at the dream of a symbolist, but bear in mind that we are not speaking of the fraternity when we use the word Masonry; we are speaking of that hieroglyphic, moral system taught agreeably to ancient customs by types, emblems and allegorical figures; and having four principal ideas: a belief in one God, a life after death, a symbolical idea of building, and the seeking after something which was lost. It is true that the careful student finds clouds of darkness occasionally hiding these real intents and purposes. At times we read of the ceremonies degenerating into the common and vulgar, as in the case of the mysteries of Bacchus at Rome. But like the hidden river which disappears under ground, only to flow out fresh and pure farther on; so we find these fundamental characteristics of Masonry occasionally hidden, but later coming to light.

Considerable has been written on all of these four characteristics, especially on the belief in one God and on the idea of building. Let us also look into the subjects of immortality and the seeking after something which was lost. These two subjects are so closely akin to the legends of Hiram and of the Master's Word in our Masonry of today, that it may be well for us to see what meaning these two symbols had in the Masonry of Antiquity.

In the ancient Egyptian Mysteries, Osiris represented the spirit of the Sun, the principle of light and life. He was assailed by the powers of evil and was killed, and apparently the forces of darkness ruled. Isis went out to seek for him, and Osiris was later resurrected and brought to life. This story was portrayed in dramatic form in the Egyptian mysteries. The facts are verified by Plutarch, Plato, Epictetus, and others. Substantially the same story was told by Mithras in the old Persian Mysteries, of Dionysus in the Grecian and Syrian Mysteries, and of Bacchus in the early Roman rites. All were slain and then sought for, and finally raised or brought to life. A death and a life after death has been one of the fundamental teachings of Masonry in all ages. These old mysterious ceremonies have been an expression of that idea of immortality which seems to be ever present in the heart of man from remotest antiquity.

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