

THE ALTAR OF FREEMASONRY

BY

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PREFACE

I have had many expressions of thanks from Brethren throughout the country for my Lectures on the Second and Third Degrees, and numerous suggestions have been made to me to prepare a Lecture that might be introduced as part of the working of the First Degree. This I have now ventured to do.

In many ways the First Degree is not excelled by any of the later ones. It is the foundation of our system the basis upon which our whole structure is reared. I hope the following pages will be found helpful to Brethren in the way of explaining the scope of the Degree and illustrating the symbols presented in the Tracing board.

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The enthusiastic Freemason who is genuinely interested in the system of morality which the Order exists to inculcate climbs rung after rung of the ladder which leads to knowledge in our mystic circle. Doubtless the brother who reaches the summit forgets much that he has learned in the course of his toilsome ascent, but one thing he is ever likely to remember is the Altar at which he knelt as an Initiate, and upon which, when darkness had been removed from his wondering eyes, he beheld the three great Lights of our Ancient and Honourable Fraternity. The Altar is the rallying point of Masonic thought. It is the point with the Masonic circle at which all distinctions among men are swept away, and to which every member may stand related in a common endeavour to achieve a splendid equality of Virtue, Morality, and Brotherly Love. Rising from this sacred spot at which, by his belief in God and his honour as a man, he has pledged himself to secrecy, fidelity, and obedience, the young mason is privileged to view the Lodge as an emblem of the Universe, and to note the symbols of the Faith of which, of his own free will and accord, he has become a devotee. And the Altar itself may first claim his attention.

From earliest days the Altar has been invested with peculiarly sacred associations, and in most religions has been regarded as an indispensable requisite of every place of worship. In primitive times it was believed to be the temporary abode of the Deity; and, if the idea is well founded that the Lodge is a symbol of the Universe, it is fitting that the Altar should occupy a central position since the Supreme Being, whose favour we solicit, and whose love we acknowledge, is the centre and source of all creation. The original purpose of an altar was to provide a place where sacrifices could be made. After the erection of the Tabernacle, there was added the Altar of incense which is described as square in section, one cubit each way, and two cubits in height, with projecting horns; and authorities insist that that is the proper form of a Masonic Altar. In the Jewish ritual the Altar had a three-fold significance: it was the place where sacrifices were made, where incense was offered, and at its horns certain classes of offenders found sanctuary. In modern Freemasonry, the whole may be moralised as the spot at which the fervent Craftsman offers the incense of Brotherly Love, Relieve, and Truth, on which he lays unruly passions and worldly appetites as a fitting sacrifice to the genius of the Order, and under the shadow of which he finds sanctuary from greed, and avarice, and other lusts that would devour him.

The Altar is the appropriate resting-place of the three great Lights of Masonry which are the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square, and the Compasses. These are called the furniture of the Lodge, and are dedicated respectively to God, to the Master, and to the Craft. The Initiate is told that the Bible is a gift from God to man to rule and govern his faith, the Square is to square his actions, and the Compasses to keep him in due bounds with all mankind. Oliver, in his lectures, illustrates the three Lights as follows:-

"The Bible", he says, "is said to derive from God to man in general, because the Almighty has been pleased to reveal more of His divine will by that holy Book than by any other means. The Compasses, being the chief implement used in the construction of all architectural plans and designs, are assigned to the Grand Master in particular, as emblems of His dignity, He being the chief Head and Ruler of the Craft. The Square is given to the whole Masonic body, because we are all obligated within it, and are consequently bound to act thereon."

As we rise from the Altar to take our place in the Universe symbolised in the Lodge we, as worthy Masons, should carry the three great Lights with us, letting them be lamps unto our feet in all our later days: treasuring in our hearts the Volume of the Sacred Law as the unerring standard of Truth, the Square as the monitor of mercy, and the Compasses as the symbol of that circle of Temperance in all things by which we should constantly surround ourselves.

Passing from the Altar and the Lights, the Initiate may next observe the form of the Lodge of which he is now a unit. It is what is popularly, if somewhat inaccurately, described as "an oblong square", and is situated due east and west. According to Oliver the form of the lodge ought to be "a double cube expressive of the united powers of darkness and light in the creation, and because the ark of the Covenant and the Altar of incense were both of that figure." Dr. Albert G. Mackey, in his "Lexicon of Freemasonry," puts forward the theory that the oblong form has a symbolic allusion to the ancient world. "If," he says, "we draw lines which shall circumscribe just that portion of the world which was known and inhabited at the time of the building of Solomon's Temple, these lines, running a short distance north and south of the Mediterranean Sea, and extending from Spain to Asia Minor, will form an **oblong square**, whose greatest length will be from east to west, and whose greatest breadth will be from north to south. This oblong square, he adds, which thus enclosed the whole inhabited part of the globe would represent the form of the Lodge, to denote the universality of Masonry, since the world constitutes the Lodge; a doctrine that has since been taught in that expressing sentence: In every clime the Mason may find a home, and in every land a brother." Brethren with a larger imagination take even a broader view than Mackey, telling us that the Lodge represents the whole universe, being in length from east to west, and in breadth from north to south, and in height even to Heaven itself. And it is just because of this that the roof is frequently decorated to represent the starry firmament, an emblem of those immortal mansions to which faithful Masons hope at last to ascend, there to behold the Grand Master of the Universe who reigns for ever. To reach the celestial city the Initiate is taught that he must climb a ladder which rests upon the Volume of the Sacred Law, and of which the principal rungs are Faith, Hope and Charity -- Faith in God, Hope of Immortality, and Charity towards all men.

The Ladder, frequently called Jacob's Ladder, because it suggests that which appeared to Jacob in his vision at Bethel, is one of the prominent emblems of the Tracing Board to which the Initiate's attention may next be directed. There is a tradition that in early days the speculative Mason, anxious to illustrate his teaching, followed the fashion of his Operative brother, and chalked the desired design on the floor of the Lodge, just as to-day, in rural places, we may find a stonemason who draws upon the ground the arch for which he is dressing stones. It is probably on account of this ancient custom that one prominent feature in the movable Tracing-Board of to-day is what is called the Mosaic Pavement which represent the Floor or Carpet of the Lodge.

The pavement itself with its chequered squares is a fit emblem of human life, with all its lights and shadows – its joys and sorrows, its successes and failures. To-day "our feet tread in prosperity, to-morrow we totter on the uneven paths of weakness, temptation and adversity," and, therefore, by such a moral emblem as this we are taught "not to boast of anything but to give heed to our ways, and walk with humility and uprightness before God."

The Pavement is skirted by the indented or Tesselated Border, and the whole is bound by a cord of sixty threads which terminate in tassels pendant from the corners. The conventional explanation of the Indented Border is, that, as the Pavement "points out to us the diversity of objects which decorate and adorn the whole creation," so the Border "refers us to the Planets which, in their various revolutions, form a beautiful border or skirtwork round the Sun," an explanation which, I fear, is not very satisfactory. A more reasonable interpretation is given of the cord of sixty strands. These strands, Bro. J.G. Gibson tells us, "represent the regular number of members" that were wont to be in a Lodge, and the whole, he adds, "was arranged round the boards with a series of lovers' knots – all meaning the mystic tie by which each of the members of the Lodge, and all, might be regarded as bound to serve the brotherhood and each member of it."

The Tassels pendant from the corners are called the Guttural, Pectoral, Manual and Pedal Tassels, and they allude to the four Cardinal Points of the Lodge -- N. S. E. and W. -- the four Cardinal Virtues, and the Mason who desires a Biblical reference says that they also refer to the four rivers of Paradise. According to one authority they point us to four deliberate acts in the First Degree:-

Guttural, the tongue, alludes to the penalty of the Obligation under which the Initiate swore never to divulge the secrets of the Order; **Pectoral**, the breast, in which the Freemason safely deposits his secrets from a curious world; **Manual**, the hand placed on the Volume of the Sacred law, as a testimony of his assent to the Obligation of a Mason; and **Pedal**, the feet placed in the form of a Square at the N.E. part of the Lodge to denote a just and upright man and Mason.

Another authority connects the four more closely with the Cardinal Virtues and that as follows:--

Guttural, belonging to the throat; and as the throat is that avenue of the body which is most employed in the sins of excessive indulgence, it suggest to the Mason symbolic instructions in relation to the virtue of Temperance; **Pectoral**, belonging to the breast; and as the heart has always been considered the seat of fortitude and courage, the word suggest to the Mason certain symbolic instructions in relation to the virtue of Fortitude; **Manual**, belonging to the hand, and as in a peculiar manner masons are reminded by the hand of the necessity of a prudent and careful observance of all their pledges and duties, therefore this organ suggests certain symbolic instructions in relation to the virtue of Prudence; and **Pedal**, belong to the feet and therefore, as a just man is he who plants his feet on the solid foundation of right, and cannot be moved from that position either by the allurements of flattery, or the frowns of arbitrary power, so the word suggests to the Mason certain symbolic instructions in relation to the virtue of Justice.

It is a pious belief, indicating boundless charity of mind, that the Cardinal Virtues which are indicated on the Tracing Board by the Tassels were constantly practised by a great majority of our ancient brethren; and whether that be so or not, there cannot be any manner of doubt but that the Mason of to-day who seeks to regulate his daily life and conduct by them will not only be a worthy and valued member of society, but a faithful brother of our ancient and honourable Fraternity.

Still keeping in view that the Lodge is a symbol of the Universe, and that the Universe is the Temple of the Supreme Being who we acknowledge as Master, the student of the Tracing Board may next be directed to observe the three Pillars that are grouped around the Altar. These great Pillars are symbols of the supports of the Lodge and the Universe, and represent Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty, the divine attributes of Him whose Wisdom is infinite, whose Strength is omnipotent, and whose Beauty shines throughout the whole of creation in symmetry and order. Moralising upon the Pillars and the attributes they symbolise, the meditative Mason learns that he should strive to acquire. Wisdom to guide him in all the undertakings of this life, supplicate Strength to support him in all times of difficulty, and cultivate that Beauty of holiness which will enable him to adorn the inward man with faith in God and hope of an immortal land, where the dreams of our present earth will be realised in fullest measure.

The other outstanding features of the first Tracing Board are the Ashlars and the movable Jewels, all of which are intimately related to each other in our system of morality. The rough Ashlar is a symbol of man in his rude and ignorant condition uninfluenced by education or other refining process, but, just as the unhewn stone from the quarry is, by the industry and skill of the Operative, wrought into due form and rendered suitable for the most elegant building, so man, by the tender care and wise instruction of those around him is educated, refined and made a fit member of civilised society. Thus improved, and living constantly by the Square of God's Word and Compasses of a good conscience, man becomes a subject who may be fitly illustrated by that symbol which we call the Perfect Ashlar. In transforming the stone from its rough to its polished state the movable Jewels -- Square, Level and Plumb-rule -- are employed and

consequently each has its distinct place in Masonic allegory. The Square is a constant reminder to the freemason that he should regulate his action by the Masonic rule and line which are laid down in the volume of the Sacred Law, and that he should never forget that, just as the stone is tried and proved by the application of the Square, so, by the application of the eternal and unchanging principles of morality, each action in human life is judged, and its value ascertained. The Level is an emblem of the equality of all men in the sight of the Eternal God who will reward or punish us, not according as we may have gained or lost the things that belong to this world, but according as we have obeyed or disregarded His divine commands. The Plumb-rule is the symbol of justness and uprightness of life and action and admonishes the Freemason to walk with humility before God and ever to have eternity in view.

The lessons that the faithful and earnest Craftsman learns at the Altar of Freemasonry, and from a study of the Tracing board, must lead him instinctively to recognise that the distinguishing characteristics of the Brotherhood are Virtue, Honour and Mercy.

It is said that Marcellus, the roman consul, contemplated building a temple to Virtue and Honour, but departed from the idea, and later, erected two structures so placing them that the worshipper who desired to approach the temple of Honour could only do so by passing through the temple of Virtue. The design of the Consul is object lesson to all men that Honour cannot be attained except by Virtue. To make men virtuous is one of the main objects of the Fraternity. Virtue has been described as the highest exercise of Reason, and Honour as the most manly sentiment or impulse of the soul which Virtue can inspire. The actions of all good men are regulated by Honour, for the man of Honour scorns to do evil. The Virtuous and the Honourable man is also a man of Mercy, that quality which adds lustre to the monarch's crown, freshness to the victor's wreath, and is the chief attribute of the deity on whom the best and wisest of men must rest his hope when the actions of this mortal life are weighed in the eternal balance.

Virtue, Honour, and Mercy crown the hill of high endeavour which every faithful craftsman seeks to climb, and if he be true to his code, and earnest in his toil, then, in the words of the familiar lecture, "though these characteristics should be banished from all other societies they will still be found in a Mason's breast."

The lessons which the Freemason learns at the Altar would not only be seen reflected in his own life, but should help him to influence the world around. The thought is beautifully expressed in the opening lines of a poem by br. McBride, Bard of Leven St. John No. 170:--

Go forth, go forth and be a Mason true
Be master of thyself, and thou shalt sway
A mightier sceptre than great Caesar knew,
A Kingdom grander, born not for a day,
But as thyself - - immortal.