

Masonic Legends

by
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The purpose of this short paper written, by request, for the Transactions of the Dorset Masters Lodge is to call attention to some legends attached to the craft of Masonry, both Operative and Speculative, which require consideration and in some cases elucidation.

To begin with, I might point out that the ritual, which we hear recited in our lodges, contains many statements that are either untrue or are very loosely made, as well as some assertions that are quite devoid of authority. I think we may regard these statements and assertions as being legends for our present purpose.

Bro. T.W. Rowe, in a paper *Rowe versus Emulation*, read before the Masters and Past Masters Association, Christchurch, New Zealand, dealt extensively with these, as well as with the grammatical errors and faults of literacy style which blemish our ceremonies; and again Bro. the Rev. W.W. Covey-Crump, in his installation address to the Quatuor Coronati Lodge, dealt extensively with the scriptural inaccuracies which have found their way into our ritual.

It has been suggested, and not without reason, that these and other palpable mistakes of one kind and other are proofs of our descent from the working masons of old days, who handed down orally from generation to generation the secret lore of the craft. Nothing would be more likely to happen than confusion in this kind of transmission.

Some Inaccuracies

Perhaps before passing on to other legends I ought just to mention some of these inaccuracies in the ritual to which I have above made allusion. When we are told that a certain sign took its rise at the time Joshua fought the battles of the Lord in the valley of Jehosophat (or it may sometimes be Rephidim or Ajalon) we are quite at a loss to find scriptural authority for the statement. For something analogous to it, we can find in Exodous xvii, 8-13, an account of a posture adopted by Moses when he held up his hand so that Israel might prevail. A very fine picture by the late Sir John E. Millais, P.R.A., in the Manchester Art Gallery, depicts this incident, with Aaron and Hur supporting the Prophet's hands.

At another stage of our proceedings we say *And god said In strength will I establish this house,* etc., but there does not seem to be any record of this in the sacred volume.

Pillars, of one kind and another, play a fairly conspicuous part in our ceremonies, and those to which i would first of all call your attention were the two great pillars at the entrance to the Temple erected by King Solomon. We are accustomed to speak of them as the right and left hand pillars, but this must surely lead to confusion, for it is evident

that everything depends on the point of view. Fortunately, we can dispel the difficulty for we read in II Chron. Iv, 10. And he set the sea on the right side of East end, over against the south. As the entrance to the Temple was at the East end, over against the South. As the entrance to the Temple was at the East end, the positions of the pillars is thus clearly defined, and actually they are exactly opposite to the common acceptance. I believe the credit of having solved this problem belongs to Bro. J.T. Thorp, of Leicester, the able editor of the Transactions of the Lodge of Research, No. 2429.

As to these pillars there is no authority for saying that they were formed hollow to serve as archives for Masonry, not that they were a memorial of the miraculous pillars of fire and cloud that attended the Israelites in their wanderings. Nor, again, is there any mention in the Scriptures of these pillars being adorned with balls. And as to these balls having maps of the terrestrial and celestial globes, we can only say that to the best of our knowledge map-drawing was invented by Anaximander of Miletus, in the sixth century B.C.; even if Solomon did use maps centuries before they were known, he displayed a wonderful lack of wisdom in exhibiting them on pillars, which, at the lowest computation, must have been at least twenty-seven feet in height !

The Old Charges

In a wonderful series of old MSS. known by the title of Old Charges we have, amongst other things, a kind of history of the craft or story of the gild which is commonly called the Legend of the Craft. These old documents, which date from about the end of the fourteenth century, so far as transcription is concerned, but are necessarily of a much older origin, have been described as the title deeds of our fraternity, furnishing the necessary proofs of our antiquity. I cannot do better than give you a modernised transcript of my own for this legend, merely premising that it has been compiled, not from one MS. only, but has been made to embody the essentials of the whole series. It runs something in the following manner:--

Good Brethren and Fellows, our purpose is to tell you how and in what manner this worthy Craft of Masonry was first begun, and afterwards how it was mentioned and cherished by Kings and Princes and many other worshipful men; and to those that are here we shall declare the charges that every Freemason should keep. For the science of Masonry is a virtuous Craft, and well worthy to be kept, being one of the seven liberal arts and sciences which are as follow. The first is Grammar, which teaches man to speak and write correctly. The second is Rhetoric, which teaches man to speak in subtle terms. The third is Logic, which teaches man to discern truth from falsehood. The fourth is Arithmetic, which teaches man to reckon and count all numbers. The fifth is Geometry, which teaches man to mete and measure the earth and all manner of things and Masonry is of this science. The sixth is Music, which teaches man the craft of song and sweet sounds, and the seventh is Astronomy, which teaches man to know the course of the sun, moon and stars.

Thus it may be proved that all the sciences of the world are grounded on the science of Geometry, for there is no trade or craft which does not work by mete or measure, nor does man buy or sell anything except by weight or measure, and especially do ploughmen and tillers of the soil work by the science of Geometry. None of the other sciences can enable man to carry on his trade or craft in such a way, wherefore we argue that Geometry is the worthiest of all sciences.

We shall now tell you how this science was begun. According to the fourth chapter of Genesis, before Noah's flood, there was a man called Lamech who had two wives, one called Ada and the other Zillah. The first wife Ada bore him two sons, Jabal and Jubal, and the second wife Zillah bore him a son and a daughter, Tubal-Cain and Naamah. These four children found the beginning of all the crafts in the world. Jabel, the eldest son, found the craft of Geometry, and he was the first person to divide lands and flocks of sheep and lambs, and he was also the first to build a house of wood and stone. Jubal found the craft of Music, Tubal-Cain the craft of the Smith and Naamah the craft of Weaving. Now these children knew that God would take vengeance upon the earth, either by fire or water, and in order that their discoveries might be preserved to future generations they wrote them upon two pillars of stone; one of marble, which would not burn in fire, and the other of lattress, which would not drown in water. After the destruction of the world by flood, Hermes, who has been called the Father of Wise Men, found one of the pillars and taught the sciences written thereon to other men. At the building of the Tower of Babel, masonry was in great repute, and Nimrod, the King of Babylon, was himself a Mason and a lover of the craft, so that when Nineveh and other cities of the East were about to be built, he sent thither three score masons at the request of his cousin, the King of Nineveh, and when they went forth he gave them a Charge in this manner:— That they should love each other truly, in order that no discredit should fall on him for sending them, and he also gave them a charge concerning their science. These were the first Masons who ever received any charge. At a later date when Abraham, with his wife Sarah, went into Egypt he taught the seven sciences to the Egyptians, and he had a worthy scholar called Euclid, who made profitable use of his instructions. In these times it happened that many Lords and other great men of the realm had so many sons, some by their wives and some by other ladies, for that is a hot country and plenteous of generation, that they had not sufficient means to maintain them.

So the King of the Country called a Council together and caused a parliament to be held to ascertain if any scheme could be devised to remove the difficulty. After full consideration they issued a proclamation that if anyone could inform them of any cunning art or science which would be of any avail he should be richly rewarded. Euclid, therefore, came before the King and his Council and offered, on condition of being appointed by commission to rule over them, to teach their sons the seven liberal sciences. The commission having been granted, Euclid took these Nobles' sons and instructed them in the science of Geometry and how to apply the knowledge to all manner of worthy works, such as the building of castles, churches, manors, towns and houses, and he gave them Charges similar to those which Nimrod had given in Babylon, with the addition of others which would take us too long to describe; and he made them swear a

great oath, which men used at that time and gave them reasonable wages that they might live honestly. And he also arranged that they should assemble annually in order that they might take counsel together and settle any points in dispute, and how best generally to advance the interest of the craft.

Long afterwards, when the Children of Israel were come into the Land of Behest, which we now call Canaan, King David began to build the Temple of the Lord, and he loved Masons well and gave them Charges as Euclid had done in Egypt. And after the death of David, his son Solomon completed the temple which his father had begun, and he sent for masons into divers towns and countries, and gathered together twenty-four thousand men, of whom one thousand were ordained to be governors of work. And there was a King of another country whose name was Hiram, and he loved King David well and gave him timber for his work, and he had a son name Aymon, who was a master of Geometry and chief of all Masons and of all graven and carved work belonging to the Temple, as related in the First Book of Kings.

Skilful craftsmen walked abroad in different countries, some to learn more science and others to spread the knowledge they had already gained, and it happened that there was a curious craftsman named Naymus Graecus who had been at the building of King Solomon s Temple, and he went int France and there taught the craft to Charles Martel, who afterwards became King of that country. Charles took upon himself the charges of a mason, and for the love he bore to masons he set many of them to work and gave them good wages and ordained for them an annual assembly as previously related for masons in Egypt.

England at that time stood void of any charge of Masonry, but when St. Amphibal came out of France he converted St. Alban to Christianity. The King of England at that time was a pagan, and he walled the town of Veralum, which is now called St. Albans, round about, and St. Alban, who was a worthy Knight, was chief steward to the King, and had the government of the realm and also the making of all walls, towers and other works, and he loved masons well and cherished them much and made their pay right good, considering the times, for he gave them thirty pence a week with three-pence a day for their noon-findings, for at that time a mason took but a penny a day and his meat, and he gave them charges which St. Amphibal had taught him and they differ but little from the charges in use at this day. Soon after the death of St. Alban grievous wars disturbed the realm and the good order of Masonry was destroyed, until the time of King Athelstane, who brought the land to rest and peach and erected many abbeyes, castles, and other buildings, and he had a son called Edwin, who loved Masons even more than his father did, and was a great practiser of Geometry and communed much with Masons, and he was afterwards made a Mason himself, and he obtained from the King, his father, a charter that they might hold every year an assembly wheresoever they wished within the realm, that they might correct any faults, errors, or trespasses concerning their craft. Edwin himself presided over a great assembly of Masons at York, and he there made Masons, and he ordered all who had any writing concerning masonry to produce them, when some were found to be in Latin, some in Greek, sone in French and some in other

languages; but the meanings were all one, and he caused a book to be made thereof telling how the craft was found, and he commanded that it should be read whenever any Mason should be made and that he should be given his charge.

Right worshipful masters and fellows who have been at divers assemblies from time to time since then have ordained and made other charges according to the necessities of the times, and these charges have been seen and perused by our late Sovereign Lord Henry VI and the Lords of the honourable Council who have approved them and agreed that they were good and reasonable. And the good rule of masonry obtains to this day, the charges being descended through the various channels described in the foregoing narrative.

The manner of taking the oath at the making of Masons:--

Tunc unus ex senioribus teneat librum et ille vel illi ponant manus supra librum tunc praecepta deberunt legi. [then one of the elders shall hold out a book and he or they (who are to be made masons) shall place his or their hands upon it and the following precepts shall be read].

Every man that is a Mason take heed right wisely to these Charges, if you find yourselves guilty of any trespasses amend your errors against God, for it is a great peril to forswear yourselves upon a book.

As you will easily observe, this is a perfect farrago of nonsense so far as history and chronology are concerned. Nevertheless, it is not without interest of value; and I have myself in a paper on the Old Charges and the ritual read before the Q.C. Lodge in 1918, tried to develop a theory that it has served as a basis for our ritual, not only so far as the general run of our ceremonies is concerned but in many cases as to the actual verbiage.

Quatuor Coronati and Other Legends

An examination of the legend will reveal that running through it are quite a number of subsidiary legends, which have been dealt with at various times by diligent students. I might specially mention the Naymus Graecus legend and the Prince Edwin legend which have been specially handled from time to time in the pages of A.Q.C.

And this, quite appropriately, brings me to the legend of the Quatuor Coronati itself. There are various accounts of this to be found in old MSS, but, so far as our purpose is concerned, we cannot do better than consult the Oration delivered at the Consecration of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge by the late Bro. The Rev. A.F. Woodford and the By-Laws of the same Lodge which embody the story as unfolded by the first Secretary, the late Br. G.W. Speth.

It really seems, then, that the title Quatuor Coronati embraces two groups of Saints, one comprising five craftsmen and the other four soldiers in the roman army, who suffered martyrdom in the time of the Emperor Diocletian, and whose festival is now dated in the calendar of the Church of Rome on the 8th November the day appropriately set aside for the installation meeting of the Lodge. The mason martyrs were named Cladius, Nicostratus, Symphoranius and Castorius, with an artisan, Simplicius; and the soldiers were Severus, Severianus, Carpophorus and Victorinus. The martyrdom of the first group has been assigned to A.D. 296 or 302, and of the second to 298 or 304. I need not delay you with details of their offences, nor the methods of their deaths. It is sufficient for our purpose that they suffered and died for their faith.

And, turning now to the question of the Mason-word, which may possibly lie within the compass of a paper of this kind, we know from a poem named The Muses Threnodie, by Henry Adamson, M.A., published at Perth in 1638, that the word existed at least as early as that date, for, along with other significant allusions, we have the couplet:-

For we be Brethren of the Rosy Cross
We have the Mason-word and second sight.

Again, in the year 1652 the Presbytery of Kelso sustained the action of the Rev. James Ainslie in becoming a Freemason declaring there was neither sinne nor scandale in that word meaning the Mason-word. It has been stated frequently that this word has been lost, and that we have now no idea what it was, but some students incline to the idea that the indications are sufficiently clear to enable us to form a very shrewd guess. Here I cannot be very explicit. I must only guardedly hint that it was a word of omnific power.

The Death of the Builder

As to the Hiramic Legend the most important, perhaps, of all our legends it is only possible to say that there is no direct reference to it in the V.S.L. Nevertheless, Bro. The Rev. Morris Rosenbaum has endeavoured to shew in a paper, The Two Hiram, that although the death of the builder is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, there were really two Hiram father and son one of whom was the designer, or architect, of the building and the other the mere artificer who cast the pillars and vessels of brass. The former was dead by what means we can only guess when the latter completed the work.

In Ezekiel xxvii we have an account of the slaying of the Prince of Tyre, who has been suggested as the second of the G.Ms. at the building of the Temple, and again in I Kings, xii, 18, we read of the murder of Adoram, who is elsewhere referred to as Adonhiram, by the mob. I dare not in this mode of communication say more.

Very significant concerning our third step in Freemasonry are two proper names to be found in I Chronicles ii, 49, and xii, 13, especially when studied in connection with the tables of proper names, not only in connection with the Genevan version of the Bible, but in some modern concordances. I should like to suggest that we continue to use in our workings, in view of this evidence, the old expression, the builder is smitten, in preference to the modern one the builder is slain.

I might here mention that corruptions of the words I am hinting at are to be found in early prints and writings, some of which may fairly be claimed as being of pre-Grand Lodge date.

This legend of the death of the builder is worth considering in connection with features in many notable buildings, the most important of which is perhaps that of the Prentice Pillar in Roslin Chapel, near Edinburgh. Here we have a story so closely approaching our own Hiramic Legend that we cannot help associating the two. Nor can we imagine that the story has been invented after the erection of the structure, for we have in addition to a subsidiary pillar known as the master s, carvings of the widow s head, the Master-mason s head and the Apprentice s head with the wound on the forehead. Other examples may be found in the Apprentice bracket at Gloucester, the fine wheel window at Lincoln and several others, all involving the same general idea the death of the master-mason, or chief builder, or the apprentice of skill, who certainly technically died as an apprentice to rise as a master of his craft. Nor, I think, should we neglect the attitudes of certain carved figures of which I shall now only particularise a boss on the vaulting under the parvice at Peterborough.

Benhadad s Escape

In I Kings, xx, we have an account of the defeat of Benhadad, King of Syria, by Ahab, King of Israel, when the former was taken captive and would in the ordinary course of events have been put to death, but intercessions occurred with favourable results for we read: So they girded sackcloth on their loins and put ropes on their heads and came to the King of Israel and said. They servant Banhadad saith, I pray thee let me live. And he said - IS he yet alive? He IS my brother. Now the men did diligently observe whether ANYTHING WOULD COME from him and did hastily catch IT: and they said Thy brother Benhadad.

It would, of course, be going too far to suggest that we have here an example of a masonic sign having saved a man s life, but for what the incident is worth I think it worthwhile placing it on record in this paper on legends.

Before drawing to a conclusion, I might class as legends the various subterfuges adopted by Brethren to conceal their lack of Masonic Knowledge. Many of these have been brought to my notice. A well-known brother asked me about certain peculiar characters on the Third Degree T.B. He was told by P.Ms. that he could not have any explanation until he had reached the chair. After his installation he was fobbed off with the excuse that the explanation could only be given to R.A. masons, and them, when he had attained

that rank, he was assured that he would need to wait until he had passed the first Principal's chair. All of which is very pathetic, for really any novice with the aid of the Masonic cipher, with its several variations and inversions, can quite readily decode the harmless characters. And this brings me to the meaning of the three figures 5 on the coffin. We are all inclined to view subjects from our own standpoint. Being accustomed to read plans on which levels can only be indicated by a figure, I for long assumed that they referred to the DEPTH of the grave, for we are instructed there in a grave from the centre three feet east and three feet west (that is to say six feet long) three feet between north and south (three feet wide) and five feet of more perpendicular (five feet or more deep). On mentioning this to a brother architect, he disagreed with me and said, that in his opinion, the figures referred to the three groups of Fellow-crafts who were sent in search of the missing G.M. But a little later in the day, whilst discussing the matter with Bro. Songhurst, the erudite Secretary of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge, he informed me that the figures had arrived by a process of evolution. On early boards, or cloths, the marks of the feet were shewn so that candidates might take the steps correctly. Later these foot-marks were replaced by two inclined lines resembling the Roman numeral V, and from this it was easy to imagine how the Arabic numeral 5 came to be substituted.

Thus far have I carried my rambling remarks, and it is evident that my paper is more tentative or suggestive than in any way complete. I must, therefore, endeavour to close with a suggestion as to the meaning of our system, and it is no less than this. Nature has implanted in the breast of man a hope that when he has finished with this mortal existence something remains for him in a future state. All the mysteries that ever existed have taught the story of a birth, a death and a resurrection or regeneration even the Christian faith is no exception to this rule and therefore it is no wonder that the Masons of old, who were engaged in the erection of actual temples, should have transmitted to their Speculative successors, who are engaged in the erection of spiritual temples, the tradition or legend of a glorious faith in immortality.

S.M.I.B.

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