

On Ancient Philosophy and Masonic Origins

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The history of the Masonic Order is one of noble endeavor and splendid enterprise, of violent conquest, dreadful persecution and heroic martyrdom. The modern Mason can very easily trace his lineage back to a time filled with political and sociological intrigue, a time when the divine prerogatives of humanity were being crushed by the three great curses of ignorance, superstition, and fear. It was unlawful to think, forbidden to philosophize, and rank heresy to doubt. To question the infallibility of the existing order was to call down upon one's head the wrath of both church and state. Democracy was in its infancy, yet those in power were already fearful of its potential. It became a secret dream of the oppressed to re-establish a golden age upon the earth, where the thinker could think in safety and the dreamer could dream in peace, where the wise could lead and the simple follow, and all might dwell together in fraternity.

All of this is well known to today's contemporary Mason, many of whom are content to trace the craft back to the workmen's guilds who chipped and chiseled the cathedrals and palaces of medieval Europe, and to be sure, the body of Freemasonry as it stands today, arose from those guilds of tradesmen who wandered the face of Europe, leaving behind monuments which can even now inspire our imagination, however the true origins of Freemasonry arose much earlier, fostered by men who walked in spirit with God, long before the universe was spread out or the scroll of the heavens unrolled. Many modern Masons, on the other hand, seem less concerned with their ancient origins, which lie far outside the domain of accepted history, and the inner meanings of the symbols and rituals of the order, which are enveloped in obscurity, are now all but lost to us. Indeed, so much has been misplaced and disregarded, so much ruled in and ruled out, that the modern rituals do not in every case represent the original rites of the craft. In writing his "Symbolism", Albert Pike declared that "few of the original meanings of the symbols and rites are known to the modern order, and nearly all of the interpretations now being given are superficial. Even such familiar emblems as the Apron and Pillars are locked mysteries whose keys have been thrown away by the uninformed."

It has indeed become difficult to convince the present-day Mason that the primordial secrets of his society are worthy of his profound consideration. Today's Mason seems fundamentally opposed to a mystical interpretation of his symbols, for he shares the attitude of the "modern" man in his general antipathy towards mysticism and transcendentalism. Many strenuously oppose any effort to interpret Masonic symbols in the light of such archaic

philosophies. They seem fearful that from their rituals and symbols may be extracted a deeper meaning, one that may shake the foundations of accepted dogma upon which they have built their lives and anchored their faith. They prefer a simpler, more conventional version, and so cling to the many tangible merits of the craft, its steady growth, its fraternal spirit, and its many worthwhile charitable endeavors with an effervescence of understandable pride. This is all well and good. Such labor is noble and necessary. We are in fact our brother's keeper.

The more studiously-minded Mason however, regards the order as an aggregation of thinkers concerned with the deeper mysteries of life. Pike, as well as Preston, Mackey and in fact, nearly every great historian of Freemasonry have all admitted the possibility of the modern organization being connected with the ancient Mystery Schools, prefacing their descriptions of the fraternity with excerpts from ancient documents descriptive of prehistoric ceremonies, even recognizing in the legend of Hiram Abiff many elements of the Egyptian Osiris myth. These chroniclers, however, failed to drive home the one point necessary to establish the true purpose of Freemasonry. They did not realize that the Mysteries perpetuated within the rituals of Masonry were in fact the principles of a fundamental philosophy of life so transcendent in nature that it can only be trusted to those who have been tested and proven to be beyond all human frailty.

The secret doctrine that flows through Freemasonic symbols, and to which the true Masonic body is consecrated, has its source in three ancient and exalted orders. The first were the Dionysian Artificers, the second, the Greek and Egyptian Mystery Schools, and the third were the Arabian Rosicrucians. The Dionysians were the master builders of the ancient world, and Hiram Abiff, if we can believe the sacred account, was himself a Grand Master of this order. They were the first to employ the tools of the builder's craft as symbols under which to conceal the mysteries of the soul and the secrets of its refinement through human regeneration. The Dionysians also first likened man to a rough ashlar which, trued to a finished block through the cultivation of reason, could be fitted into the greater construct, "that temple not made with hands". The Roman Collegia was a branch of the Dionysians and to it belonged those initiated artisans who fashioned those impressive structures that still lend their immortal glory to the Eternal City. In his "Ten Books on Architecture", Vitruvius, an initiate of the Collegia, revealed that which was permissible concerning the secrets of his order. Of the inner mysteries, however, he could not write, for these were reserved for those who had donned the leather apron of his craft. "Is this not an art full of secrets? And believest thou, O fool, that we plainly teach this Secret of Secrets, taking our words according to their literal interpretation?"

Our Grecian brother Pythagoras and his philosophical heir Plato both traveled extensively, the latter in Egypt and the former as far as India and Persia in search of wisdom, spreading the esoteric doctrine and the distinction between the initiated and the profane still found in Masonry today. Philo, who lived a century later followed the same theories, and endeavored to show that the Hebrew scriptures were in fact allegories concealing the most profound truths, According to him, the literal meaning was for the vulgar alone, and that one who has meditated on philosophy, purified himself by virtue, and raised himself through contemplation, would discover a wholly different order of existence, and be initiated into such mysteries of which the elementary or literal world offers but an imperfect image. "Let men of narrow minds withdraw with closed ears," he wrote, "We transmit the divine mysteries only to those who have received the sacred initiation, who practice true piety and who are not enslaved by the empty trappings of words and the preconceived notions of the profane." Similarly, Masonic ritual transmits knowledge to initiates who are training themselves to understand things in terms of the deeper meaning rather than the superficial language, to others they present themselves as casual fiction, containing hints which are often passed by entirely unnoticed.

But Truth is eternal. The so-called revelations of faith that persist in the various modern religions are but a re-emphasis of an eternal doctrine. The Gnostics derived their chief doctrines and ideas from the writings of Plato and Philo, as well as the Zend-Avesta and the Kabbalah, for to them all truth was one truth, pure in its source. "Behold", they said, "the light which emanates from the source of all light, just as the springs which nourish all the Earth emanate from the same ocean." Thus Moses did not originate a new religion for Israel, he simply adapted the Mysteries of Egypt and of the one god Amon, to the needs of the Hebrews. The Arc of the Covenant that was borne into battle by the Israelites was itself copied from the Isiac Arc, which is still visible in bas-relief on the walls of the Temple of Philae, even after being relocated to the island of Agilika during the construction of the Aswan High Dam. In India, Buddha likewise adapted the teachings of the Brahmins to the needs of the Hindu masses. The mystical secrets hidden in the holy Vedas were thus disclosed so that all men, regardless of caste, might partake of this wisdom. Jesus was himself a Rabbin of the Essenes, a teacher of the Holy Law, interpreting the Torah according to the teachings of his sect, and through the medium of parables and allegories, he tore the veil from the temple so that not only Pharisee and Sadducee but also publican and sinner could together view the glory of an ageless truth. In his cavern on Mount Hira, Mohammed prayed not for new insights but for old truths to be restated in their original purity and simplicity, in order that men might again understand God's clear revelation to the first patriarchs, those

Mysteries of Islam that had been celebrated in the great black cube of the Kaaba centuries before his first holy pilgrimage. So it is with the Masonic traditions. Even the casual observer must realize that the true wealth of Freemasonry lies in its rituals, by means of which every Mason is made familiar with its principles, thus revealing by degrees this universal Truth; that the Supreme Being is a creature of light, whose rays or emanations pervade the universe, and that the essence of the Human Soul is an image of God, a single spark of this light, purified through resurrection and the practice of virtue and meditation. It is upon this Mystery that all of the various religions of mankind are established, and it is for this light that all Masonic journeys are a search.

These Mysteries of ancient Egypt and the Zend-Avesta of Persia, having found a haven in the hidden retreats of the Sufi Mystics, were afterwards carried to Europe by the Knights Templar and the Rosicrucians. The temple of the Rose Cross at Damascus has preserved the secret philosophy of Sharon's Rose, and the Dervishes still meditate upon the secret instruction perpetuated from the days of the four Caliphs. Was Jacques de Molay burned by the Holy Inquisition simply for wearing the red cross of the order? What were those secrets which empowered him to remain true, even unto death? Were the Knights Templar condemned simply because they had amassed such great wealth and exercised such a degree of temporal power that they threatened the established rule? The studious Mason knows that it was not the power and wealth of the Order, but the knowledge which they brought back from the East that the Church feared. The Templars had discovered a part of the Great Arcanum, they had become wise in those mysteries which had been celebrated in Mecca thousands of years before Mohammed, and it was for this knowledge that they were denounced and driven into hiding. Truly, one who possesses such wisdom cannot be enslaved by any earthly master.

Long before the establishment of Freemasonry as a fraternity, a philosophic clan which moved across the face of Europe under such names as Illuminati and Rosicrucians sought to challenge the entire structure of feudalism and regal supremacy. Since learning was limited at that time to churchmen, they soon developed an overwhelming preponderance of ecclesiastics in its membership. Seeing this, a small number of adepts, including the Rosicrucians, Qabbalists, and Alchemists, retired to what they termed the "House of the Holy Spirit", where they enveloped themselves in certain "mists" impenetrable to the eyes of the profane. Upon the withdrawal of these initiates, the order remained as a powerful clerical body which, while deeply rooted in ancient lore, lacked the "keys" by which this symbolism could be interpreted. In due time, the original adepts passed on, after first entrusting their secrets to carefully chosen successors. In the

meantime, a group of men in England, under the leadership of such mystics as Robert Fludd and Elias Ashmole, became determined to reintroduce the ancient Mysteries to the order. They sought out those initiated individuals who were still in possession of the secret doctrines and brought them to England, where they remained for many years, designing the symbolism of Freemasonry, and incorporating into its rituals the same divine principles and philosophies that had formed the inner doctrine of those earlier secret societies. Upon completion of the by-laws of the new fraternity, these initiates retired into central Europe, leaving behind a group of disciples whose task it was to establish and develop the outer organization which was to function as a screen to conceal the activities of the esoteric order. The whole structure of Freemasonry is founded upon the teachings of this secret society of adepts, whom the studious Mason will discover to be the definitive link between the modern Craft and the Ancient Wisdom. The outer body of Masonic philosophy was merely the veil of this Qabbalistic order whose members were the custodians of the true Arcanum. Does this inner brotherhood still exist? Evidence points to the fact that it does, and these adepts are the actual preservers of those secret processes whereby the illumination and completion of the individual is effected. They are the veritable guardians of the "Lost Word", the Keepers of the Inner Mystery, and the Mason who searches for and discovers them will be rewarded beyond all mortal estimation.

Any Mason who would discover the "Lost Word" for himself, must remember that he is of an order apart from other men, that he is in the possession of a great secret, and that if he would be a worthy successor to those Master Masons of other ages, his thoughts must be measured by the profundity of Pythagoras and the lucidity of Plato. The officer who would serve his lodge most effectively must realize that those before him are not merely a gathering of properly tested men; they are the keepers of a Sacred Truth, the guardians of a Supreme Mystery, and the duly installed Wardens of God's living legacy. A new light is breaking in the East, and a bold new era is dawning for Masonry. From the insufficiency of theology and the hopelessness of materialism, men are once more turning to seek the God of philosophy. A great reconstruction is at hand, the debris of a fallen ethos must be cleared away and the old footings must be found again, that a new temple may be raised thereon. The dream of the ages, the rule of the Philosophic Elect will yet be achieved, and is in fact not too far distant. To her loyal sons, Freemasonry sends this clarion call: "Arise ye, the day of labor is at hand. The great work awaits completion, and the days of man's life are few."

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