

WALoR 1992 TRANSACTIONS Vol.42 No.02.1

ON THE CENTRE (THE CHEQUERED PAVEMENT)

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INTRODUCTION

Few things remain unchanged for very long. It is not Nature's way. As Freemasons, we may find this to be something of a paradox since we rely heavily upon tradition and stability, however it is a fact, none-the-less.

So it has been also with this paper, it has undergone considerable change, even its title has changed somewhat since it was first conceived. I'm still not sure if I'm completely happy with it and perhaps that's how it will always be. I'm also not completely comfortable that its content goes as far as I feel it should, however I am conscious of the limits imposed upon me by considerations of what is useful to present here and what I am permitted to present here.

As an introduction, Brethren, I should observe that this paper is possibly not what you are expecting. Not what you are used to. It has not been written so you can sit comfortably and let it drift past without effort on your part. It is designed to make you think. To draw your attention to the fact that there are some perspectives in our Craft which may be unfamiliar to you. That there are some things you may not have considered. That we don't know it just yet. When it is finished you may like it or you may not. It doesn't much matter which since the truth or otherwise of what is said is not dependant upon audience reaction. What would be unfortunate is for you to have no opinion at all on the matters raised. Because we as Freemasons should all have an opinion about the Spirit of Freemasonry and that's what this paper is all about. It is entitled 'On the Centre' because, I believe, what is being discussed is central to the very purpose of Freemasonry. To its very essence.

Freemasonry is, as we all know, a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols..... it is a familiar statement, one which is often accepted without any thought as to its real significance. Tonight I would like us all to take a little time to consider its relevance to us as Freemasons, because as we are all surely aware, there are symbols all around us in the Craft and it is my intention to single out one or two of them to try and discover what ideas they might suggest and illustrate.

To help the process along a bit, it might be helpful for us to reflect upon the precise meaning of the word 'symbol'. The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines it as 'A mark or character taken as the conventional sign of some object or idea or process..'; in other words, a visual representation of an abstraction; an idea.

Throughout history, symbols have been used to communicate ideas without having recourse to words. Research shows that many symbols have the remarkable property of suggesting similar ideas to all men, these are described as archetypes. The means by which they work is beyond the scope of this paper, however it is important to understand that they do work and that the use of symbolism generally is a very effective and reliable way of communicating directly from one person's mind to another's.

Symbols are particularly useful for the communication of ideas which for one reason or another do not lend themselves to description by words, or concepts which it is felt should be restricted to a select few. From very early in the civilisation of Man, symbols have been used by all religions, to prevent all except their own elite from discovering (and thereby perhaps profaning) what were considered to be great or Divine Truths. The use of symbols forms a universal language which speaks directly to the mind and they do so very effectively because the human mind only ever thinks in pictures. Words are merely an imperfect means of conveying the pictures in my mind to yours or those in your mind to someone else.

It is surely evident to us that Freemasonry employs exactly this means to convey the essence of Masonic Philosophy to other Freemasons. It is easy to see we are literally surrounded by the symbols of our Craft. Many of these are well explained and understood, others are less so. But all appear in our Lodge Rooms as the result of a deliberate act of inclusion. Each was put carefully into place for a particular reason and it seems to me it is our duty as Freemasons to discover what that reason was. In this way, we will be better able to understand the ideas that were intended should be conveyed to us by the fact of their inclusion.

The idea that we might see around us as we meet, the legacy of those brethren who helped to shape the Craft that we now enjoy and share, has occupied the minds of Speculative Freemasons everywhere. The desire to try and discover what lies behind our symbols is a fascinating if sometimes frustrating search for understanding and it is this search for understanding that is my principal subject tonight, for it is quite certain that those eminent Freemasons, who designed our Lodge Rooms and carefully devised and polished our ceremonies over the centuries, have gone to considerable lengths to build into those designs and ceremonies, ideas that clearly illustrate the relationship that binds each one of us to the Great Architect in the Fatherhood of God and therefore the Brotherhood of Man. Indeed it is this certainty that has prompted me to examine in some detail the design of certain features of our Lodge Rooms, in an endeavour to glean from them some of the ideas which they conceal.

The proposition is that Masonic symbolism conceals a vast learning. A treasure-house of wisdom to be had just for the asking. I'm not the first to suggest such an idea and I'll not be the last, but let's suppose, just for a moment, that there is some substance to it. Would it not then be the duty of every Freemason to search out this wisdom and draw from it whatever benefit he may? Of course it would be. The difficulty is, we are told precisely the opposite, sometimes by quite eminent Freemasons. That there are no secrets or mysteries in our Craft save the means by which Freemasons can recognize each other. One often hears it said that Freemasonry is not a Secret Society but a Society with secrets. An exercise in semantics if ever I heard one, because if one enquires as to what those secrets are, one is told they have no reality, no existence beyond a few signs and passwords. Signs and words which are incidentally, no further away from the non-Freemason than the nearest Public Library. If these are our only secrets, Brethren, then you must surely know they're not much of a secret any more. Indeed, if this is all we've got of value, then we don't have very much at all.

Why should one believe there are subtle Mysteries to be found in Craft symbolism despite what some insist? Because Freemasonry itself tells us so. Let me refer to our Book of Ritual. Time and time again in our ceremonies we read that Freemasonry bestows the benefits of Mysteries and Privileges. From his very first knocks upon our tyled entrances, the Entered Apprentice is described as being 'properly prepared, humbly soliciting to be admitted to the Mysteries and Privileges of Antient Freemasonry', Mysteries which according to some, don't exist!

In the first degree alone, he is told of these non-existent Mysteries a total of 9 times! Come on Brethren, who is kidding whom? It is clearly intended that a certain and very specific impression be created early in the mind of the new Freemason; the impression that there is something of great and mysterious value in the Craft. That Freemasons have an understanding not generally shared by those outside. Yet when the new Freemason (quite understandably) asks what these 'Mysteries and Privileges' are, he is told 'There are no Mysteries.' 'No secrets save our sign and tokens!' What nonsense! We spend the entire ceremony of Initiation stressing the idea of Hidden Mysteries to the Entered Apprentice and the rest of his masonic career telling him they don't exist! No wonder we are losing members! It is simply unreasonable to suggest that the most prized treasures of Freemasonry are merely a few signs, words and handshakes. These signs, tokens and words are secrets to be sure, there are different secrets for each degree, but the secrets are only there to guard our symbolic mysteries, they are not the Mysteries themselves. Surely this is perfectly obvious to all.

Arthur Edward Waite, a prominent speculative Freemason in the early years of this century had this to say on the Obligation of the Entered Apprentice in his 'Discourse on the Fellow Craft

Degree'... " this pledge, with the penalties attached thereto, must cover more than the simple signs, tokens and words and the procedure which takes place in our Lodges, or too elaborate machinery may be thought to be put in motion than the end appears to require".. An entirely fair point.

The fact is, we have an abundance of Hidden Mysteries in the Craft and it's about time we started having a careful look at them. Then we might all learn something.

So where should one begin? The Craft is very complex. Where should one make a start? Where could one search to discover the very essence of symbolism? It is often said that the best hiding place for something of value is right out in the open. Could it perhaps be right out in the open that the Hidden Mysteries of Freemasonry would be best concealed? All around us in our Lodges, for all to see?

The suggestion has some merit, after all that's where they would be most readily to hand for the active and enquiring Freemason to discover and yet be sufficiently well veiled to prevent the merely casual observer from stumbling across them. So let's have a look, perhaps it is now time to re-appraise our surroundings. To see, perhaps for the first time, that all may not necessarily only be what it appears to be.

The supreme image in Freemasonry is that of the Great Architect. A Divine Builder engaged in the process of building, or perhaps having completed the building. In any event, the Freemason is seen as repeating on a smaller scale this same construction process- the building (or rebuilding) of the Temple of King Solomon.

The symbolic creation of this House of Holiness reflects an inner process, one in which the body is prepared as a Temple for the in-dwelling Spirit. You may recall the old proverb which cautions against pouring fine wine into cracked vessels; the First Degree Ritual says of the Institution of Freemasonry.." honourable it must be acknowledged to be since as by a natural tendency it conduces to make those so who are obedient to it's precepts". The practices of Freemasonry tend by their influence to create vessels of quality within which the Higher Self (or spiritual essence) may blossom and grow. One finds this idea is a common thread running through many religions, ancient and modern, All stress the necessity of building a suitable abode for the Spirit and all recognise that this is necessary for the process of spiritual development.

The Masonic Lodge Room celebrates this building process. The Hiramic Legends are re-enacted there, the works of the Almighty are commemorated there. We all do our own building there. The building of man. Every symbol in the Lodge Room is suggestive of the building process, including some that are obviously so.

I remember as an Entered Apprentice, being conducted all around the Lodge Room by an older Past Master. He showed me its major features and when we had made the full circuit, he pointed out that we should always try not to tread upon the Chequered Pavement. He did not elaborate on this point, but went on to observe that everything in the Masonic Lodge is connected with the ideas of building and construction.

A bit curious, I asked about the Pavement to which he had previously referred and he replied, virtually quoting from the First Degree Tracing Board Lecture. As it happened, I had already read this lecture and I remember being struck by the fact that he had apparently given little thought to the matter beyond what was printed, although the Pavement itself is possibly the major feature in the Lodge by virtue of it's size and position. I have long felt disappointed that the description given in the lecture contains no reference to the building process and in this respect appears to be a little out of context with the other major features in the Lodge.

Yet, why should the symbol which is placed at the very centre of our Lodge Rooms, not also be symbolic of the building process? Why of all our symbols, is this one different? Careful analysis reveals that it isn't different at all, it does indeed represent a part of the building process, although it refers to building on a high abstract level, whereas our own is on a more personal scale.

In a sense, one could regard the Chequered Pavement itself as a Tracing Board, one which is used at a Divine level and it is this aspect that I would particularly like to explore.

Firstly, let us consider if the position it occupies has any significance to us. If, as I maintain, the Pavement is the fundamental symbol of the Craft Lodge, then one would surely expect to find it placed at the pivotal point of the Lodge Room; right in the Centre. The place from which a Freemason cannot err! It is said that the Freemason cannot err from the centre because from very ancient times, the circle and the point at its centre have been associated with the ideas of infinity, omnipresence and the Supreme Being.

Indeed, the symbol of the point within a circle is well known to Freemasons and is traditionally placed between two parallel lines on the front of the Master's pedestal. It is written elsewhere that the Almighty said "I am the circle whose Centre is everywhere and Circumference nowhere" and this is possibly the best expression of the idea and symbolic importance of the figure.

When standing in the centre of the Lodge Room, note that the Freemason is directly beneath the symbol of the presence of the Great Architect himself. This clearly emphasizes the importance of the position and given this importance, it is perhaps ironic that the central feature of the Lodge, the Chequered Pavement, is one of the least understood symbols in Freemasonry, yet one of the most important.

In any analysis of this kind, one tends to focus on what is familiar and I hope you will forgive me if I do just that. The Pavement in my Mother Lodge at Darling Range is very familiar to me, so I will base my remarks particularly upon that one example. Not all Pavements are exactly the same, but most are similar and so the general remarks which follow can equally well apply to many of our Lodge Rooms.

The Chequered Pavement at Darling Range is rectangular, as all are. It is roughly twice as long from East to West as it is wide from North to South. It therefore echoes the symbolically important double cube form of the Master's pedestal. It consists of a chequered area, black and white by squares, surrounded by a border of triangles, also alternately black and white. The bases of the white triangles are innermost, the single points facing outwards. The black triangles necessarily therefore face inwards towards the Pavement itself, from an imagined and implied 'Outer Darkness'. At each corner of the chequered central area is a single tassel, creating the impression of a carpet. As it happens, this particular chequered area is 13 squares long and 7 wide and this arrangement has some interesting numerical properties, however the exact dimensions do vary from Lodge to Lodge.

In the centre of the Pavement area itself is a five-pointed Blazing Star, sometimes called a 'Glory', which is recognizable as the Pentagram or Pentagon which forms the basis of the Seal of Solomon. It is enclosed within a circle consisting of two shells, the outer one gold and the inner sky blue.

There are therefore three circular boundaries containing these two shells and it is tempting to attribute these three lines to the Trinity which is expressed in many major religions and which some Masonic authors maintain is reflected in the Lodge Room by the Master and his two Wardens. Within each of the angles of the star itself are five rays proceeding outwards and in the centre of all are the square and compasses. Of course, above the Pentagram hangs the letter 'G' representing the presence of the great Architect.

The black and white colouring of the squares and triangles represents the fundamental duality and cyclicity of Nature and Creation; and this is worthy of some expansion.

Life is a series of cycles. I am sure we all know and understand that Life and its events are dominated by cycles. They are always present within our daily lives, some of them are so familiar

that we don't take much notice of them. They pass unseen. But they are always present and always influencing our lives.

Biorythms for example are types of cycles, they are circular functions based upon sine waves and are natural rhythms, constantly ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, waxing and waning. We all have these inner cycles of physiology and psychology. Indeed, in this respect we are no different from anything else in the Universe. You see, everything is governed by cycles; the days, the weeks, the solar years, the lunar months. Even decades and centuries can be measured in cycles and of course our own daily lives are dominated by the cycle of personal routines. Even the rise and fall of entire civilisations of man are measurable in cycles. There are cycles everywhere, on a large scale, the Great Platonic Year of 25,920 Solar years is the time taken for the precession of the Equinoxes to move backwards through the 360 degrees of the Zodiac. On a smaller scale, there is the very short period of time taken by an electron to complete just one orbit around the nucleus of an atom. Then of course there is the ultimate and most absolute of cycles, the one which is said to govern the expansion and contraction of the Universe itself. This cycle is described in certain inner teachings, where it is referred to as 'the Days and Nights of the Gods', heralded by the opening and closing of the Eye of Shiva. It is this harmonic, cyclical characteristic of Creation which is particularly symbolised by the black and white squares. The periodic expansion and contraction of the Universe brings Creation alternately to the brilliance of the Divine Presence and to the absolute darkness and void of non-existence. It is like a vast pulse, perhaps the very heartbeat of the Almighty Himself, which is reflected throughout Creation at all its levels. The cycles which govern the universe itself also govern all that exists within it, including you and I and the lives we lead. This is the very essence of the Ancient Hermetic philosophy 'As above-so below' which I shall refer to again later on.

Life is a series of moments, which are linked together to form a continuum existing between sets of opposing forces. We exist in a world governed by comparisons and limited by extremes. We compare Good and Evil as absolute qualities without thinking much about it, yet they are only ever relative values. We also compare night and day, work and rest, love and hate, light and darkness, but these too are only relative. Indeed the only way we can really describe anything at all is in terms of a comparison or its relationship with something else. The quality of goodness, for example, has no meaning without the idea of evilness to exist as a contrast. The idea of light has no meaning unless we compare it with the idea of darkness, which is the absence of that light. These pairs of opposites are built into the very fabric of Creation. They are quite inescapable and are a consequence of the cyclical nature of the Universe which we have already discussed.

This then is the symbolism of the Chequered Pavement. The law of cycles and the principle of the necessity and interdependence of opposites. They describe the laws which govern the Universe created by the Great Architect. The light repels the darkness and keeps at bay the boundaries of that darkness. This is represented by the black and white triangles in the border around the Chequered Pavement. The tassels at the corner confirm the idea of the fabric of the world of space and time itself. The Loom of Creation, into which are woven the lives of us all. The whole structure represents in symbolic form the truth that everything must co-exist in equilibrium with its own opposite. Light and darkness not only intermingle but are interdependent. This train of thought goes quite a long way.

After having progressed this far in our study, we can now direct our attention to the symbol which is suspended in the centre of the Chequered Pavement- the five pointed star of Creation itself. Here we discover an important point, Brethren, the ideas of the fabric of the Universe; Space and Time must not be confused with the idea of Creation itself. They are different things entirely. Inextricably linked to be sure, but separate. They cannot exist without each other, but they are not the same. They are separate ideas but completely dependent upon each other for their very existence. Without each, the other cannot be. If you like, each are local ideas relative to each other, two halves of the same coin. So it is in our present study with the Chequered Pavement and the circles containing the five-pointed star. The circles and chequered squares represents the fabric and absolute Laws of the Universe. The Blazing Star represents the completed creation suspended therein, which is subject to those Laws. Without each, the other cannot exist.

The five-pointed star also represents the sun, symbolically representative of regeneration and perfection in nature. The shape of a man is also evident in its 5-rayed form. Reflect upon it for a moment. Two arms, two legs and a head. The five-pointed star representing both the Macrocosm and the Microcosm, the large and the small, the heavenly or archetypal Man elsewhere referred to as Adam Qadmon and the earthly man which is his reflection in the world of matter. Seen with one point upwards, the Pentagram represents the dominance of Spirit over Matter. It should never be represented in its more sinister reversed form.

Man is the Microcosm as Creation is the Macrocosm, they are reflections of each other on different levels and are therefore frequently represented by the same symbol. Within each man there is a perfect part which answers to the perfection of the larger Creation. This is one of the secrets of the Pentagram, that Man is created in God's image. The relationship is central to an appreciation of the place of Man in the vastness of Creation. The ancient Egyptian Philosopher Hermes Trismegistus, Thrice Hermes, summed it up in the motto 'As above- so below'. All things are linked and nothing exists in isolation.

In addition, the five-pointed star, or Pentagram, represents the five great Elements or principles of Nature, which are said to act and combine together to form the basis of matter. Each of these great principles contains the idea of all the others and so all are interconnected. The five rays proceeding outwards from each angle of the star symbolically represent these constituent parts.

This then is the Pentagram, the five-pointed star. In traditional symbolism it can be shown to represent the relationship between the circumference of a circle and its centre and therefore implies the mysterious ratio P1. The relationship that exists between the Creator and His Creation.

In the centre of the star is set the composite figure of the Square and Compasses with which we are all so familiar. It is the definitive symbol of Freemasonry. Recall it to your mind's eye now. See it suspended in the air above you and as you see it before you, draw a line to join the two points of the Compasses. Draw another to join the two ends of the Square and it becomes a rough form of the six-pointed star or Star of David which represents the perfection of Nature. Here again an important distinction is found; the Pentagram represents perfection in the form of Nature, or the created universe and the Hexagram represents perfection of the very essence or Spirit of Nature. The combination of the two thus guarantees the enduring harmony of Creation. This is the inner harmony and grace which ensures that Creation does not dissolve into darkness and chaos before it's cycle is complete. In addition, the Hexagram contains within itself the perfect number seven; six outer rays and the single place of Holiness in the centre.

It is symbolically very important that the Square and Compasses are placed in the centre of the five-pointed star, as if in some form of conjunction or communion with it. Together these two figures represent the number 11, a number of great mystery and importance for the Initiate, which represents the relationship between a Man and his Higher Self. It implies their union, the attainment of spiritual immanence, what the Yogis call 'Samadhi' and the Buddhists and Hindus call 'Nirvana'. The same number is related to the two great pillars, Boaz and Jachin. All these ideas are closely linked, although to consider the Pillars more closely at this time would lead us too far for the time available.

This process of union or conjunction can only occur in the presence of Divine Providence and we therefore still need to find a symbol of Divinity before we can conclude that these ideas really are intended to be reflected in the design of the Pavement. Fortunately, just such a symbol is not far away. Place yourself (in your imagination) to stand upon the Star on the Chequered Pavement. Look upwards and see the suspended letter 'G' directly above you. This symbol is also frequently misinterpreted; it doesn't directly represent the Most High for no attempt should be made to represent the Almighty in so gross a form. But it does represent the presence of the Almighty and the path of Grace which links the higher faculties of Man with Him. This is reflected in the Tree of Life of Cabalistic mysticism which attributes the same significance to the Hebrew letter 'Gimel',

the equivalent of our 'G'. Thus the connection with Divine Providence is discovered and on reflection, it is fitting, essentially perhaps, that this union of the five and six pointed stars should occur directly beneath that symbol.

Some of you will doubtless observe that the geometry of the Square and Compasses is a little different from that of the Hexagram or six-pointed star and one could therefore argue that they cannot be the same thing. Clearly the angle of the Square is 90 degrees whereas that of the Hexagram is only 60 degrees. One could perhaps conclude that the two things cannot therefore be representative of each other and this does seem reasonable enough at first sight, however a review of the separate meanings of the Square and Compasses reinforces the view that when combined they are indeed a fitting representation of the Hexagram.

Let me explain; the Hexagram or Star of David is a complex symbol, capable of many interpretations, however the most frequently used is the idea of two triangles, one reaching upwards from Man to God and the other reaching downwards from God to Man. (As a matter of interest, some Masonic authors claim that this symbolism is also seen in the interlacing triangles formed by the flap and rosettes on the Master Mason's apron). Now if we follow the idea of the two triangles and recall that the circle is a symbol of Godhead and the square or cube is a representation of matter or Creation, we can see that the interlaced Compasses (which describe a circle) and the Square (which is the shape upon which the cube is based) similarly represents the interweaving of the Divine with the material. The same symbolic message is therefore conveyed and the two sets of symbols are in this sense, completely interchangeable and equivalent.

So there we have it... a fresh look at the Chequered Pavement. Perhaps a slightly different perspective from that with which we are familiar, but one which I hope may none-the-less provoke or encourage some new trains of thought.

In the final analysis, there are only two valid reasons for the study of any symbol system and this really is the key to it all. Firstly, one can try to perceive in those symbols, what was in the mind of their author. What he was trying to convey to us. We are aided in this endeavour by the fact that certain symbols are common to many men and many races. The Jungians maintain they exist in the collective unconscious. The Freudians call them 'archetypes'. The ancients had other, more cryptic ways of describing them. They certainly and without a doubt exist. By their means it is possible to see into the thoughts of an author by analysing the symbols used by him.

There is no great mystery here, no shadowy esotericism, merely a language without words. A Language of concepts and abstractions. It is a convenient and effective means of ensuring that the understandings of wise men are communicated only to other wise men and not wasted on the undeserving or the uncaring. Of course, at best we are embarked upon a speculative endeavour. Sometimes we simply cannot confirm what the original thoughts were behind the use and context of any set of symbols. It is a difficult problem and one which is, I suspect, the ultimate dilemma of we Freemasons. Sometimes we just cannot be sure. So we are sometimes obliged to draw whatever benefit we can from the contemplation of our symbols. To simply gain what we can; sometimes, perhaps often on a very subjective basis. However this is also quite valid, indeed it is the second justification for the speculative study of symbolism. It is also one of the great rewards of Freemasonry. It is for me at least and I am quite sure it will become so for many of you as well.

Brethren, tonight I have sought to do two things. Firstly I have tried to share with you a conviction that there is a pressing need to take a deeper look at masonic symbols. Not all will feel that need, never-the-less it is important to the Craft that some should and should be encouraged to do so. Indeed, the very future of the Craft may depend upon us recognising the value of the treasures of which we are custodians.

Secondly, I have tried to consider some of the major symbols of the Lodge Room. I hope I have been able to show that the Chequered Pavement is symbolic of the nature and structure of Creation- representative of the Divine building process, just as other Masonic symbols represent a more personal building process. I hope you will find food for thought in what has been said.

The exercise this evening has been one of looking below the surface of things, Lateral thinking perhaps. Of considering ideas which are different from those we are used to. Of reflecting upon the essential Divinity of all Creation. You see, to a degree it's all in the eye of the beholder. Some men will look upon life and creation purely at face value; handsful of dust and dirt. Others will see things rather differently; Thomas Traherne captured the real essence of this idea when he wrote of a rare and very special perception of the commonplace. It is worthwhile recalling his experience in a small, quite ordinary country village when he was able to gain a somewhat different perspective on his surroundings. Some would call it a vision. This is what he later wrote;

" The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought that it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold; the gates were at first the end of the world....The children tumbling and playing in the street were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born nor should ever die. But all things abided eternally and were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of Day and something infinite behind everything appeared "

What a wonderful way to see the world; to see behind the smallest thing, the hand of the Great Architect himself- the presence of the Most High.

It just depends on how you look at things.

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