

THE PLANTS FOUND IN FREEMASONRY

An Address Given by WBro Alan Hunt, PAsstGDC,
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Brethren, the explanation of the Second Degree Tracing Board, given to me as a Fellowcraft Freemason many, many years ago, was the first instance that I can recall when plants and freemasonry were coupled together. Several years later, when my wife and I were travelling through Israel, we purchased from a street vender some fresh pomegranates. I remember vividly my amazement as to the number of seeds found inside the fruit and thought about a line from the lecture – *pomegranates, from the exuberance of their seeds, denote plenty*.

On our return home to New Zealand we discovered that pomegranates grow well in the Hawke's Bay climate and, recently, a tree was sighted in a house garden not too far away from where we now live in Taradale.

In considering a topic for this address as Master, my thoughts went to that moment in Israel when I cut open a pomegranate which led to a contemplation of what other fruits or plants get a mention within the three degrees of our ritual. There are a few. Besides pomegranates, we have acacia, corn, lilies, roses, fir and cedar.

My reading in our research library and elsewhere brought forth a lecture, entitled *Some Plants in Freemasonry*, which was given in the United Masters Lodge No 167 by WBro J A Veale in June 1975. I am indebted to WBro Veale and will freely use his paper as the basis for my address tonight.

Pomegranates ...

The pomegranate tree is usually small and bush-like, but on occasions can reach to twenty feet in height. The plant is often thorny, not as bad as, say, boxthorn, but tending that way. The oblong shaped leaves vary in arrangement on the branch from opposite to alternate to whorled. The showy bell-like flowers can be red, yellow or white, but the common colour is scarlet. The globular fruit is as large as an orange and has a hard rind of a bright red or yellowish colour when ripe. The fruit is surmounted by the persistent lobes of the calyx, which resemble a rosette or crown. Beneath the rind is a crimson, agreeably acid-tasting juicy pulp in which are embedded many seeds. The flowers of the pomegranate undoubtedly served as patterns for the "golden bells" and "open flowers" embroidered on the robes and regalia of some of our brethren, and the fruit served as a model for other ornaments. The erect calyx-lobes on the fruit served as inspiration for Solomon's crown, and, incidentally, for all crowns from that time on.

The pomegranate has been cultivated since prehistoric times and was common in the Holy Land, Egypt and along the shores of the Mediterranean before being cultivated in Palestine where it was one of the promised blessings. The tree is now occasionally used for ornamental garden display and its fruits are offered for sale in Europe and elsewhere. The pulp of the fruit has been used extensively since the days of Solomon for making cooling drinks and sherbets and can also be eaten raw. The astringent rind of the unripened fruit yields a red dye, as do the flowers. The rind has also been used in medicine and for tanning leather.

Pomegranates in their native haunts attain a fine sweetness, which makes them highly valued in those hot climates. A spiced wine is made from the juice and many Moslem sherbets still owe their flavour to this juice. The soft seeds are also eaten, sprinkled with sugar, or, when dried, as a confectionery. It was the Moors who introduced into Spain the method of tanning with the pomegranate rind, and made that country famous for its fine leather.

The pomegranate came to be regarded as a sacred plant in very early times and because of its large number of seeds was considered a symbol of fertility. Sacred in Egypt, its characteristic fruit is an important and recognisable component of inscriptions and sculptures. In Persia it adorned the head of the royal sceptre, and in Rhodes its flowers formed part of the royal coat of arms. An ancient representation of Jupiter shows him holding a pomegranate in his hand. In view of this, it is therefore not surprising that it adorned the trelliswork

at the top of the pilasters in Solomon's temple and, in blue, purple and scarlet embroidery, woven into the skirts of the priestly robes. The suggestion that grafting a branch of an ordinary orange on to a pomegranate tree produced blood oranges is quite false.

Some of the mythology linked with the pomegranate is fascinating. It was claimed to be the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and from this belief it became the symbol of eternal life in early Christian art. Another myth states that Pluto gained control over Proserpine by getting her to eat a pomegranate and forced her to live with him for six months of each year and with her mother, Ceres, for the remainder, thus causing the earth to seasonally cool down and then warm up. The ancient Greeks and Romans thus regarded the pomegranate as the symbol and the power of the nether world.

It also typified all seeds that must be placed underground to germinate, then emerge into light for a season, only to have their seeds return, in due time, to the darkness beneath the surface of the earth.

The original pomegranate, according to Greek mythology, was a beautiful nymph who had been told by a soothsayer that she would one day wear a crown. Bacchus transformed her into a pomegranate tree and a crown was placed at the top of her fruit.

In China it symbolised fertility and is consequently a usual offering by women to the goddess of mercy towards being blessed with children.

The Acacia ...

There is no doubt about the identification of the plant referred to by the Hebrew word “shittah” singular, or “shittim” plural. The words appear some twenty-six times in the VSL, always in connection with the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle. The meaning usually given is “not liable to rot”.

The Hebrews esteemed the acacia as a sacred wood, since the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant; the table for the shewbread and other sacred furniture were made from it.

Most authorities agree that the *Acacia seyal* and the *Acacia tortilis* are the most probable species found in biblical times, being the only trees of any size in the Arabian Desert. The wood was used for fuel while the foliage and flowers were served as food for the cattle. The mulga (*Acacia aneura*), a leafless tree of the Australian desert, is used as stock food during long droughts on account of its high protein (nitrogen) content. Most leguminous plants have nitrogen fixing bacteria in nodules on the roots enabling them to survive under poor soil conditions. The mulga is very hard, close-grained, and highly valued in cabinetwork in the same way as the Arabian species were. Mummy-coffins of sycamore were clamped shut with acacia wood by the ancient Egyptians.

The tree in the desert was shrubby, twisted, gnarled and windblown, but in favourable localities reached a height of twenty feet. Its branches were armed with one and a half inch slender spines; its leaves were bicompond and the yellow flowers similar to the wattle we know.

The importance, which even apparently insignificant details in the ritual may possess as landmarks, is well illustrated in the “sprig of acacia”. The symbol of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body is well depicted in the third degree and at Masonic funerals.

This tree was in ancient Egypt peculiarly associated with the soul, and with Osiris as God of the Resurrection; according to the most ancient accounts it was an acacia, which grew up and enclosed his coffin, although more modern accounts suggest that it was either a tamarisk or a sycamore. In the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*, the hero deposited his soul in an acacia, and so intimately was his fate bound up in it that he fell dead when it was cut down, and then came to life again when one of its seeds was thrown into water.

It may be mentioned also that the sacred character of this tree is not by any means peculiar to Egypt; in Patagonia and in Arabia, for instance, it is regarded as the intermediary between this world and the next, and any acacia near a village is always loaded with offerings. In India and many parts of Africa its wood is essential for the ceremonial making of fire by friction. Being then the *shittim* wood of the Old Testament,

with the Masonic uses previously described, is there any wonder that it was made so significant in the Hiram legend.

Corn ...

In the Masonic context, corn is used along with wine, oil and salt in the consecration of new Lodges and in the passages dealing with an ear of corn near a stream of water. It signifies plenty and abundance; wine signifies joy and cheerfulness; oil signifies peace and unanimity and salt signifies friendship and fidelity. Salt was also part of the wages.

An “ear of corn” is most certainly “wheat”, since corn is American Indian in origin and, in any case, wheat has been found buried with the ancient Egyptians. It was recognised as a symbol of regenerated life and has been used as such in the mystery systems from remote antiquity. For example, in the Egyptian rituals the candidate held an ear of wheat, fertilised by the sacred water of the Nile, and declared, “I am a germ of eternity”, while at his death grains of wheat were buried with him as emblems of immortality.

In early Greek and Roman ceremonies, at an initiation, an ear of wheat was presented to the candidate. In entrusting the candidate with the passing word, which is emblematically “depicted in our Lodge by an ear of corn near a stream of water”, we are perpetuating a sacred practice of extreme age.

Lilies ...

There is little doubt that the lotus species of Egyptian water lily served as the pattern for the carved ornamentation on Solomon's temple and on the chapters referred to in 1 Kings 7.

The lily species, *Nymphaea lotus*, common in the Nile, was a source of food; the seeds, roots and stalks all being edible. Known as the bride of the Nile, it had white flowers five to ten inches across and leaves twelve to twenty inches in diameter. It was a flower sacred to the Egyptians some four thousand years ago and an important model of art three thousand years before Christ, the inspiration of the Ionic capitals. It was the national flower of Siam. The Japanese decorate their temples with it and wrap up, in its leaves, their offerings to the departed.

It is now thought that lilies referred to elsewhere in the VSL are of different species. For instance, in the Song of Solomon the lily is a hyacinth; the Palestine anemone or windflower is regarded as the “lily of the fields”; and the lily of Ecclesiastics 1:8 and Hosea 14:5 is an iris.

The Olive Tree ...

The branch of an olive tree is referred to in the installation charge to the deacons when reference is made to it as a symbol of peace and friendship. It having its origin in the story of the dove returning to Noah with an olive leaf, indicating the flood was abating. The oil of the olive constitutes part of the wages received and is symbolically used in the consecration ceremony.

The olive would have been one of the most valuable trees of the Hebrews and in many places in Palestine would have been the only tree to be seen. It is indeed closely associated with the history of man and the development of civilisation. While it is capable of surviving and giving reasonable yields of fruit under harsh conditions it will grow in cultivation reaching twenty to forty feet high, with a similar diameter. The leathery leaves are protected against drought by the silver coating on the under side. The fruits, which are drupes (stone fruit), may be black or purple when ripe and the green, or unripe, fruits are also eaten. The oil of commerce is obtained from the outer flesh. Its survival property is contributed to by its ability to regenerate or shoot from the stumps.

In Greek and Roman mythology the olive was a symbol of Minerva, the goddess of medicine and health. In modern Italy an olive branch hung over a door is supposed to keep out devils, witches and evil spirits. Many legends concerning the olive occurred among medieval Christians, one of which is hereby described.

A seed each of the olive, cypress and cedar were said to have been given by the Angel guarding the Garden of Eden to Seth for his dying father, Adam. Planted in Adam's mouth, they eventually grew up into a single tree of three trunks, one of olive, one of cypress and one of cedar wood. Beneath this tree David wept for his sins. Solomon felled the tree, but the timber could not be hewn and was therefore cast into the marsh, where

it floated and formed a bridge for the Queen of Sheba. Finally, the wood was fashioned into the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

The Rose ...

The most common use of the rose Masonically is the “Rose of Sharon”. This name is accepted as being the common name for a hibiscus, but as this species is Chinese in origin and was not present in the Middle East until recently, it has been ruled out as the biblical “rose”. It has been suggested that the true “Rose of Sharon” could have been a narcissus or an anemone, but recent research tends to favour the tulip (in particular the *Tulipa montana* species).

In the VSL different “roses” are identified – the rose of Ecclesiastics 39:13 is an oleander, whereas the Phoenician rose is that which is mentioned in Solomon’s songs. All this goes to prove the underlying problems, which arise through the loose use of common names.

The Fir Tree ...

It is generally agreed that the fir tree in Hebrew texts refers to *Pinus halepensis*, a typical pine tree, which grows from nine to sixty feet in height. Its wood, “scarcely inferior to cedar”, was used for the flooring, ceiling and doors in building Solomon's temple, for the rafters of ships' decks and for musical instruments especially harps and lutes.

The Cedar Tree ...

There is little doubt about the translation of the Hebrew and Greek texts, except perhaps in Numbers 24:6. These trees, the cedars of Lebanon, grow rapidly to one hundred and twenty feet in height, with a trunk diameter up to eight feet. Initially they were plentiful in Solomon's time but became rare. The tree was highly esteemed, not only for its vigour, shape and age, but also for the fragrance and the lasting qualities of its wood. Solomon, Hiram, Cyrus, Zerababel and the rulers of neighbouring countries plundered the mountain heights of Lebanon for the wood to embellish their palaces and temples.