

Ascension On Jacob's Ladder.
An Address by Bro Merv Gollan, MM, to the
Hawke's Bay Research Lodge in May 2003.

The introduction of Jacob's ladder into the symbolism of speculative freemasonry is to be traced to the vision of Jacob, which is thus substantially recorded in the 28th Chapter of Genesis.

When Jacob, by command of his father, Isaac, was journeying towards Padan-aram and one night slept with the bare earth as his couch and a stone for his pillow, he beheld the vision of a ladder whose foot rested on the earth and whose top reached to heaven. Angels were continually ascending and descending upon it and promised him the blessing of a numerous and happy prosperity.

This ladder, so remarkable in the history of the Jewish people, finds its analogue in all the ancient initiations. Whether this is to be attributed to the fact that these analogues were all derived from a common fountain of symbolism, or, whether the origin of the symbol was lost among the practices of the pagan rites while the symbol itself was retained, it is perhaps almost impossible to determine with authority.

In the ancient craft degrees of the York Rite, Jacob's ladder was not an original symbol. It is said to have been introduced by Dunckerley when he reformed the lectures. This is confirmed by the fact that it is not mentioned in any of the early rituals of the eighteenth century, nor by Hutchenson, who had an excellent opportunity of doing so in his lecture on the *Nature of a Lodge*, whence he speaks of the covering of the lodge but says nothing of the means of reaching it, which he would have done had he been acquainted with the ladder as a symbol.

Its first appearance is in a tracing board, on which the date 1776 is inscribed, which very well agrees with the date of Dunckerley's improvements. In this tracing board, the ladder has three rungs, a change from the old seven-stepped ladder of the Mysteries, but which, however, Preston corrected when he described it as having *many rounds, but three principal ones*.

The Masonic ladder, which is presented into the symbolism of the first degree, is ought really to consist not of three, but of seven, steps, which thus ascend – Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice, Faith, Hope and Charity. But the earliest examples present it only with three steps, referring to the three theological virtues, whence it is called the *theological ladder*. It seems therefore to have been settled by general usage that the Masonic ladder has but three steps.

In a Prestonian lecture, the symbolism is explained thus –

By the doctrines contained in the Holy Bible we are taught to believe in the divine dispensation of Providence, which strengthens our Faith and enables us to ascend the first step. That Faith naturally creates in us a Hope of becoming partakers of some blessed promises therein recorded, which Hope enables us to ascend the second step. The third and last step being Charity, comprehends the whole and he who is possessed of this virtue, in its ample sense, is said to have arrived at the summit of his profession, or, more metaphorically, into an ethereal mansion, veiled from the mortal eye by the starry firmament.

The other four virtues, the cardinal ones, have always received scant attention in tracing boards. Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice are, somewhat inadequately perhaps, identified with the four corner tassels – for no other reason, apparently, than because the virtues are one quartet and the tassels another. Even though these virtues are called *cardinal*, they are not even placed at the cardinal points. Bro Harris, in his design of the First Degree Tracing Board, has placed upon each tassel the initial letter of one of the virtues.

Symbols for these virtues exist in the wide field of symbology. One investiture ritual says that the crossed swords of the Inner Guard represent Fortitude and Prudence and that the Cornucopia of the Stewards typifies

the other two virtues, Temperance and Justice. The point in the association is not always clear. A sword may well suggest Fortitude, but it can also indicate Justice. It is also the emblem of *balance*. The compasses, which keep us within bounds, might typify Prudence and, equally, Temperance. The Cornucopia, or Horn of Plenty, primarily signifying *plenty*, may suggest the virtue of Hospitality and it was, perhaps, for that reason selected as the Steward's badge of office, but can hardly, without forcing, be applied to the four cardinal virtues.

Perhaps it would be unreasonable to complain that more space is not given to these virtues, especially when it is remembered that the three distinguishing characteristics – Virtue, Honour and Mercy – though elaborated in the catechism lectures, are not even named in the tracing board lectures and, therefore, no reference to them is required amongst the designs. Nevertheless it would be interesting to see some designer adopt apt Masonic, or other, symbols for the four cardinal virtues and contrive space in the corners for them.

In advanced Freemasonry, we find the ladder of *Kadosh*, which consists of seven steps – commencing from the bottom – Justice, Equity, Kindness, Good Faith, Labour, Patience and Intelligence. The arrangement of these steps, for which we are indebted to modern ritualism, doesn't seem to be perfect, but the idea of intellectual progress to perfection, is carried out by making the topmost rung represent *Wisdom* or *Understanding*.

Most tracing boards place Jacob's ladder in the middle of the picture and on it are displayed the three theological virtues – Faith, Hope and Charity. The accepted colour of Faith is RED, probably because faith is supposed to be ardent. The colour of Hope is BLUE, maybe because hopefulness is an upward looking attitude of mind. For Charity, WHITE is appropriate enough, if Charity is to be regarded particularly as a candid virtue and it offers a good contrast to the RED of Faith and the BLUE of Hope. GOLD has also been used (the symbolists rank it as the chief of colours) and is therefore suitable for the *Chief of Virtues, the Greatest of which is Charity*.

Of the emblems, Faith is regularly given a cross, usually a Latin cross, one with rectangular arms of which the lower is longer than the rest. The conventional badge of Hope is an anchor, as we learn in the fourth section of the first Catechism Lecture – *Hope is the anchor of the soul*. To Charity, religious art appears to have been assigned no conventional badge, unless the children at the knee can be so styled. But, it is here unnecessary to seek outside of the craft, for; the investiture charge for a treasurer declares that *the symbolic key is employed to awaken the best feelings of the heart in acts of beneficence and charity*. Another Masonic symbol for Charity, is the glove, traditionally used as an offertory bag.

The base of the ladder rests on the VSL, which contains a record of God's plan of salvation and sets out those higher laws by which man may hope for redemption. From a numerical point of view, if we try to find why the earlier ladders had seven rungs, the schools of spiritual development tell us that the number SEVEN is the number possessing the deepest and most far-reaching symbolism of all the numbers from ONE to TEN. It represents Rest, Completion, Spiritual Realisation and Consummation. After the work of the six creative days, there follows the Divine consummation of the whole in the SEVENTH, the Sabbath of the Holy Day.

The seventh day REST does not refer to a cessation of activity, but to the emergence from CHAOS into the higher and more perfect order. This is the true work of SEVEN; it doesn't enter into the turmoil of experience in its inception but becomes operative when the time is ripe to establish new conditions and to super cede the old by a new and higher series. This is the function of the number SEVEN under every circumstance and condition and it applies, not only to personal relationships, but equally to its activity in national and international affairs.

Plato declares that the soul of the world was generated from the number SEVEN. Other ancient sages described nature as a golden egg surrounded by seven natural elements, four visible and three invisible. The visible elements were designated as Air, Fire, Water and Earth. The values of the number SEVEN are divided into the trinity of spirit and the quaternary of form. THREE, FOUR and SEVEN all bear close relationships to each other; they are powerful numbers of Life, Light and Union. The trine typifies the

spiritual and the square, the human. The union of the trine and the square signifies the interpenetration of the Human and the Divine. To realise such a union is the purpose of physical evolution.

The sum of the first seven digits equals twenty-eight digits. This number reduces to ten the number of unity. It also corresponds to the Tree of Life, which, like Jacob's Ladder, is a mystical path of return to the Cabbalists. Our Masonic apron is a square with a triangular flap, intimating the number SEVEN and all the correspondences belonging to it.

I believe the ancients, knowing that the number SEVEN is introspective and intuitive and that it is attracted to the unseen and mystic side of life and being, because it embraces the FOUR that are seen and the THREE that are secret, is one good reason why Jacob's Ladder was drawn with seven rungs.

In conclusion, may we not conclude that the Garden of Eden was not merely an outward place without man? For when Adam, by his *fall*, lost the inward life out of his centre, which proceeds from the centre unto the circumference and came unto the circumference, and his eyes were opened so that he was obliged to take in the light from the outer world, because his inner world was now hidden and shut away from him. It was then that he saw his earthliness, whereas, before, he had been full of light from the continual radiation from his centre.

We see that man has to regain contact with his centre, the vital and immortal principle within him, which is exactly the same as reunion with the Blazing Star, or Glory in the Heavens. When a man's aspiration is directed to this end, we may say that the wind of Freemasonry is favourable, because it is now flowing East-West, there being reciprocal aspiration between God and Man. For Man is continually being refreshed by this wind when he is at this labour, this desired reunion, the only labour, which, ultimately matters.

Jacob's Ladder is symbolical of the steps of ascension we need to follow on the Path of Return.

Worshipful Master, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to make this address and hope that the Brethren have found something of interest in it. My sources of reference have been the *Freemasons Guide and Compendium* (Bernard E. Jones), *Albert G. Mackey's Revised Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry* and selected transactions of the *Masonic Study Circle*.