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ANCIENT SYMBOLISM AND THE MASONIC ART: SOME COMPARISONS.

Lecture by H. W. DOWLING delivered to Hawke's Bay Lodge of Research at Napier Masonic Temple, Napier, on Monday, 4th February, 1946.

Brethren,

It was with both scruple and diffidence that I accepted the invitation extended to me to deliver the address to you to-night. I am a Master Mason only, holding no office in my Lodge.

I do not profess any profound knowledge of the craft nor of the ritual, but I have a deep curiosity to find out the meaning of our observances and to understand the underlying truths hidden in the ritual and the signs and symbols of the craft. I have read a number of volumes on the subject and have given the problems which confronted me some thought, and I ask you to accept the following as the recorded data of a junior student and enquirer only, one who does not pretend to have sufficient knowledge or experience to deal with the subject as an expert, or to propound any theory as his own.

Let me confess that on first being made a Master Mason, I was left with a sense of inadequacy. I felt that there had been no true test of merit, no opportunity afforded to follow the injunction of the first degree to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge—that I had attained so-called maturity without the proper foundation of knowledge, grounded upon experience, of the craft. I had absorbed no truth except that of universal brotherhood.

I did not know even the superficial meaning of the symbols of the craft and the furniture of the lodge, and on approaching many of the senior members of the craft I was somewhat disappointed and frustrated in my enquiries to learn that apparently, while excellently versed in the ritual, its hidden meanings and mysteries were as obscure to them as to me.

A fellow-craft cannot help but be impressed by the fact that he is enjoined to study the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science in relation to the craft, and to me the second degree is the most interesting and in substance the most important of them all. Having in the first degree been admitted to the brotherhood and been enlightened as to the principles upon which a true brother must act in the course of his daily relations with his fellows, in the second degree the initiate is surely required to advance beyond the practice of morality, justice and charity—he is put upon his enquiry into all the problems, material and spiritual, which arise in the course of his existence as a member of our complex social structure. He is instructed to gain wisdom and knowledge from study and experience. This period is one of crucial test of worthiness to be raised to the sublime degree. It is the degree of the G.G., of the draughting board, the interwoven lines of which, symbolise life with all its problems, temptations, sorrows, its pleasures and happiness—all its possibilities and its frustrations.

In this sense, brethren, whatever our rank or station in society or in the Lodge here below, we are all still fellow-crafts, all seekers after the solution of life—the greatest hidden mystery of Nature and of Science.

And as the language of words is so often found inadequate to express metaphysical thought in a lasting manner, all ages and nations, and all religions and creeds, have adopted signs and symbols as a simple method of conveying to the mind of man those thoughts and emotions otherwise so difficult to enunciate. But before understanding becomes clear, the key to the problem must be revealed, so that the solution may be available to those who would grasp the opportunity so given to unlock the door leading from darkness to the light, from ignorance to knowledge, from figurative death—to life with the companions of their former toil. To provide that key is, to my mind, the object and scope of Masonic research, and with all due deference, brethren, I am inclined to the view that greater opportunity should be afforded the young Mason to receive companions of our former toil. To provide that key is, to my compulsory study along these lines should be enforced before the raising, and if that be in conflict with the established usages of the craft, then I cannot see that anything but good would result from the E.A. or F.C. being given an indication of a suitable course of study he could pursue with advantage so as the better to appreciate the deeper meaning of the ceremonies in which he is called on to take part.

My purpose to-night, however, is not to put before you any criticisms of the institution as it at present exists, but to present what I think may be some interesting observations on the similarity of some of our symbolism with that adopted by various cults in earlier civilisations, and my earlier remarks are introductory only for the purpose of illustrating the necessity for research, in order to gain a full appreciation of the foundation principles of the Order. Speculative Masonry is a "peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." Symbols then become the means by which the mind of the enquiring Mason is directed to the hidden truths of the craft. An understanding of our symbols, their history and derivation, is therefore an advancement in Masonic knowledge which gives a much greater degree of significance to the ritual teaching than would otherwise be the case.

Bro. F. G. Belton in his lecture entitled "Some Masonic Symbols and their Probable Origin" says: "It seems to have always been the aim of man to get nearer to his idea of the Deity by the aid of symbols. They have in a quiet, imperceptible way exercised a tremendous influence on the destiny of mankind. To what extent we shall never know, but they are one of the silent forces at work, whose power, however indirect, ultimately produces great results."

Thomas Carlyle gives it as his opinion that "by symbols man is guided and commanded, made happy, made wretched. He everywhere finds himself encompassed by symbols, recognised as such or not recognised, the Universe is but one vast symbol of God, nay, if thou wilt have it, what is man himself but a symbol of God?"

And brethren, may I not put it to you that the three degrees are themselves symbols only? Masonry is a mystery embodying a series of moral principles for the cultivation and production of a high moral character here in preparation for the life here-after. The three degrees symbolise in themselves in that order: the morality of the heart in its acceptance of brotherhood; the morality of the brain in its intellectual pursuits ; and the morality of the spirit in its preparation for death.

And as undoubtedly throughout the ages of recorded time there have been men who have been concerned in speculative thought on the meaning and purpose of life and death itself the greatest of all the unsolved mysteries, it is only to be expected that research and study have disclosed many ancient cults and crafts who possessed a ritual and a symbolism so similar to our own as to lead students to believe that in form many of our signs and symbols have been directly derived from those sources.

The fact that symbols closely resembling our own are to be found in the ruins of Pompeii and many other old Greek and Roman cities and in the temples of India and monuments of Egypt, does not make it necessary to suppose that our craft is a continuation of the Eastern mysteries in a modified form, but it can probably be said with a fair degree of accuracy that throughout the ages there have been men whose symbolic teachings have closely approximated those of our own Order.

It is to be noted, however, that in the ancient mysteries the symbol itself was believed to possess an innate mystic power and was accorded a veneration often amounting to worship, and thereby lost its character as a symbol and became an object of adoration or superstition.

It became a fetish imbued with miraculous powers.

We see examples to-day in the carefully preserved relics of a great Christian Church.

When reading of the practices and ritualism of some of the better known of the ancient mysteries such as those of the Egyptians, the Greek Eleusinian mysteries, those of Brahmanism and the Persians, one cannot help but be struck by the marked resemblance between them and the symbolism and teaching of the craft degrees, and I quote in full the conclusions reached by an obviously very deeply learned brother, George Norman, in his lecture, "Freemasonry and the Ancient Mysteries".

"In this slight sketch of a great subject we cannot fail to be struck by the resemblance between the ancient mysteries and symbolism and teaching of our Craft degrees.

"In each there is the preliminary preparation and trials of various kinds, combined with a certain amount of teaching explanatory of these trials, leading up to the greater and more profound mystery. This mystery, after greater and more pro-longed trials, is shown to be the necessity of sacrifice as the means of access to a higher and better life, and the teaching here is given in dramatic form in which the initiate himself takes part.

"The drama may be summed up as follows :

- "(1) The death and disappearance of a victim.
- "(2) The search for and the discovery of the body.
- "(3) The appeal to the higher powers for guidance.
- "(4) The raising up again of the victim.
- "(5) The esoteric teaching attaching to the drama.

"It is true that in the Hiram legend the builder himself is not restored to earthly life, but the candidate who represents Hiram after being raised on the F.P.O.F. is told: 'It is thus that all M.M. are raised from a figurative death to a reunion with the companions of their former toils,' thereby indicating a glorious immortality.

"The main points of teaching common to the Mysteries and to Freemasonry may be said to be :

- "(1) Belief in the existence of one Supreme Being, who will judge men according to their deeds. This one Supreme Being could, however, manifest Himself in various ways, a. ' so we have Triads or Trinities—such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva of the Hindoos; Osiris, Isis, and Horus of the Ancient Egyptians, corresponding to the Jehovah, Mary, and Jesus of the Roman Church, and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the Anglican Church.
- "(2) The belief in resurrection or reincarnation.
- "(3) The necessity of self-knowledge. (May guide your reflections to that most important of all human studies—the knowledge of yourself.)
- "(4) The practice of charity and of goodwill to men."

This basic similarity is rather peculiarly illustrated in Brahminism.

To the initiated Brahmin all the many gods around which the Brahmin belief revolves are merely the outward manifestation of a Great First Cause paralleled in our Craft by the G.A.O.T.U.

There are long periods of initiation regulated by the seasons of the moon—there were trials of fortitude—there was a symbolic death and entombment in a coffin—and there was reference made to the Siva legend :

- "(1) Siva, the daughter of Mahadiva, has been foully murdered.
- "(2) Mahadiva searches for the body over the whole earth in great distress.

"(3) The body is found by accident, and Mahadiva appeals to Brahma for assistance.

"(4) Brahma instructs her how to recover the body and restore it to life and immortality.

"The initiate was then informed that though his body dies his soul must live on—and finally be absorbed in Nirvana.

"He was led into a darkened hall, where he passed round three times and saluted the gods. Brahma in the East, Vishnu in the West, and Siva in the South, the creating, preserving, and destroying elements."

(Geo. Norman—"Freemasonry and the Ancient Mysteries.")

The initiate then had communicated to him a secret word or name signifying the creating, preserving, and destroying power of the Deity. The Holy Trinity personified in Brahma in the East, Vishnu in the West, Siva in the South—the symbol of which was an equilateral triangle.

Is there not, brethren, a vast field for comparison in this illustration alone, not only with some of our teaching, but many of the elemental truths and conceptions of the Christian and similar religious beliefs?

Let us now look at the mysteries of Ancient Egypt, and in doing so, we are immediately struck with the fact that early Egyptian cults were Sun Worshippers—the Sun, the great luminary of Nature, was worshipped as the source of life, which rising in the East, shed light and lustre upon all within the sphere of its influence and was an obvious and important feature in the daily lives of the people.

Now that the secrets of nuclear energy are being revealed, how true is that early belief that the sun is of supreme importance in our mortal existence.

In our Craft ritual the sun is likewise the primary symbol in the opening of the lodge. The Master and his Wardens are likened to it though with different significations—the J.W. to mark the sun at its meridian, the S.W. to mark the setting sun and to close the lodge by the W.M.'s commend after seeing that every brother has had his due, and the W.M. to represent the rising sun in the East.

The setting sun is often made the symbol of the close of life. It was the funeral pile of Heracles and the chariot of fire of the Prophet.

The Greeks made Appollo, the Sun God, to be the God of Wisdom, and it may be in this sense that the W.M. is likened to the sun, for it is his duty to instruct and enlighten the brethren. His column is the column of Appollo—the symbol of wisdom—and he is the representative of Solomon, not as king but as the presiding priest in the mysteries of life and death.

In the second degree the lodge is opened on the square. We know that this is the degree of the G.G., but again the symbolism of the square is to be found in the Egyptian mythology. Ptah was the G.A.O.T.IT. who with seven assistants built the heavens on the square.

If we take it that Masonry's purpose is to fit men for the life hereafter and as Masons they are builders in the realm of the metaphysical, the analogy is clear.

There is room likewise for an interesting comparison in the fact that Ptah the Architect was assisted by seven builders, and it is peculiar that the same number of Masons can make a lodge just perfect and regular.

The square also formed the seat in the hall of judgment upon which Osiris sat judging the dead. In cube form it also was portrayed as the corner stone of the building, and is symbolical of the foundation of eternal law.

Bro. F. Foster, in his lecture on Symbolic Masonry published in the British Masonic Miscellany, tells us also that the origin of the story of the death of H.A. was the prototype of the death, burial, and raising of Osiris, the legend of which differs very little from the traditional history.

It is, however, in the ritual of initiation that the most striking similarity occurs, and I can do no better than to quote a portion of the ritual as set out in the lecture referred to:

"The Egyptian initiatory ceremony was conducted with great care. The candidates were divested of most of their clothing and a chain or rope of some kind was placed round their neck, to signify their belief in God, their dependence on Him, and their solemn obligations to submit and devote themselves to His will and service. The fact that they were neither naked nor clothed was an emblem of their untutored and unregenerate nature, and destitute of any knowledge of the true God. The candidate was blindfolded, so that in this condition the chain or rope was a symbol that the candidate was being led from darkness to light, from ignorance to a knowledge of the one true and living God. He was then led by a brother to the door of the temple or lodge which appeared as a blank wall. Arriving at this door he asked for admittance, and was asked by the 'Watcher' who he was. His answer, translated from the Egyptian, was, 'The Kneeler: He was then given a password which in Egyptian is 'Ra-gririt.' The door was an equilateral triangle, a symbol typical of Heaven. The square on which he trod as he passed through was a symbol of earth; the whole entrance symbolized passing from earth to heaven. The candidate was conducted through long passages where he had to answer various questions, words of 'power and might' being given him. Finally he was conducted to the centre of the lodge and asked what he most desired; his answer was that light might be given him.

"If a candidate turned back or violated his obligation, his throat was cut and his head chopped off so that he would be dismembered and speechless before the judgment. His heart was also torn out and given to the Devourer—this monster is represented in many of their papyri (particularly in that of Nesi-Amsu, the original of which is in the British Museum), with jaws akin to the crocodile, sitting on his haunches watching the weighing hearts in the Hall of Judgment, ready to seize upon, as his lawful prey, those that, 'when weighed in the balance are found wanting.'

"The candidate had to commence his perambulations with his left foot first, the reason for which is given in the Papyrus of Nesi-Amsu which gives the destruction of Apap, the greatest serpent of evil. The left foot was placed on him as if in attack, and is symbolical of commencing the journey of life by putting all evil thoughts and actions under and away from us, by treading down the evils which beset us through life. The destruction of Apap is given in these words : 'His body shall be cut in pieces and burnt to ashes, and these ashes scattered over the face earth and water by the four winds of heaven.' "

The last comparison which I want to make this evening you may possibly find the most interesting of all, dealing as it does with some of the ritual of the Bektashi Dervish Sect in Turkey.

A candidate for initiation into this order is deprived of nearly all clothing, and he must not have on his person any substance of a metallic or mineral nature. He enters the initiation chamber blindfolded, with a cord with a running noose about his neck. He is in charge of two guides, and has to make seven perambulations, at each of which the Sheikh of the order places a point of his pelenk, or stone having seven points, against the naked left breast of the candidate.

After the administration of an oath of secrecy, the Sheikh addresses the following words to the candidate : "Before Allah created the world there was chaos and all was dark. Darkness has not yet departed from thee. What blessing wouldst thou now desire?"

The candidate replies : "To see the light."

The Sheikh then orders : "Restore this brother to temporal light."

The more one reads the literature of this subject the more fascinating and instructive it becomes, and the student is brought inexorably to the conclusion that in all ages and all climes, and whatever the separation of time, place and circumstance, men have sought and will continue to seek for the eternal moral truths as a foundation for a better and nobler existence, and in the search for that goal have met and divided a thousand times, each absorbing from the other a thought or word or sign, so that all the moral systems which they have evolved may be recognised as having not only a common aim, but as springing from a common source—the plan of the G.A.O.T.U.