

SOME THOUGHTS ON MASONIC TRADITIONS AND KING SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

by

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People and events associated with the building of King Solomon's Temple (KST) is a theme of major importance in Craft Freemasonry. Much of our traditional history and moral geometry is based on this theme. Dr. Mackey, in his monumental "History of Freemasonry", calls this theme the Legend of the Craft. Dr. Mackey purposefully used the term legend to draw our attention to his distinction between a legend and factual history. Historical research by many distinguished Masonic scholars such as Gould, Mackey and latterly, Carr, Home and others, has shed much light on the development and use of the theme of KST by the Craft and the relationship of the use of this theme to the actual history of our Craft and our rituals.

This paper will attempt to add to our understanding of the background, development and place of the KST theme in our rituals and teachings. Perhaps too, this paper will encourage further study of the great foundations of modern Freemasonry.

There is a vast body of writings dealing with KST general and also over the past hundred years or so, a great number of books and papers with a specific Masonic specialization in this field. One of the most recent is a scholarly book which appeared in 1972, written by W. Bro. Alex Home, which most thoroughly covers "KST in the Masonic Tradition". This paper draws freely from that book and also from other sources.

Let us first briefly review some of the established facts about KST as gathered from Biblical, Archeological and Historical sources, then summarize the story of the use of the KST theme in our workings, and finally ask some questions and draw some conclusions.

The Established Facts about King Solomon's Temple

From the Bible we learn that through the scheming and plotting of his mother and of himself, Solomon took over as King of Israel when his father, King David, died in 962 B.C. Solomon was then well under twenty years of age. He began to build the Temple about four years after he became King. So it was about three thousand years ago when KST was erected and dedicated on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem. Let us here recall that the books of the Bible which record the people and the details connected with the building of KST were being written and finalized over a period some three to five hundred years after Solomon died. First and Second Kings were finalized shortly before the exile of the Jews of Judah to Babylon and thus written while KST was still in use, but several hundred years after it was built. Chronicles was written after the return from Babylonian exile and hence, after the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. This somewhat after-the-fact record may well explain the variations of the temple building story which are found in these Biblical sources.

Apart from the Biblical record, there is not known at present any direct contemporary non-Biblical written record bearing on KST confirming the building or even existence of KST. Scholars have studied ancient Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian and Semitic sources for such confirmation and found nothing dealing with any aspect of Solomon's reign. There is, however, some indirect or second-hand historical evidence confirming the building of KST. For example, Josephus, the Jewish historian writing about nine hundred years after Solomon, quotes a Tyrian record of Solomon's time of the building of KST.

Then too various Biblical and non-Biblical records relating to the second Temple built by Zerubbabel shortly after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, clearly refer to the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple.

Thus far, archeological studies arising from limited excavations in the Jerusalem area provide no direct evidence of KST. This in itself may be evidence in that it eloquently confirms the utter destruction of KST

and the whole of Jerusalem by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar some four hundred years after the Temple was built. Indirect archeological evidence though is plentiful and helpful. Here are two examples.

About sixty miles due north of Jerusalem and thus about midway between Jerusalem and Tyre there has been uncovered recently almost a complete city called Megiddo, which was built by Solomon. The building style and the form of the architecture and particularly the stone masonry is Phoenician, thus confirming the assistance provided by the Phoenician King, Hiram of Tyre, to the great Israelite builder, King Solomon. Similar Solomonic sites have been uncovered at the nearby sites of Gazer and Hazor and others.

Another outstanding archeological confirmation of Solomon's building activity was the discovery by Dr. Gluck some forty years ago at the head of the northeastern arm of the Red Sea of the Biblical City of Ezion-Geber, Solomon's seaport and site of a major copper and iron mine and smelter. This find is beautifully reported in the National Geographic for February, 1994. Thus, apart from the Biblical records, there is at present no other direct evidence of the building of KST. However, there is much second order evidence. This, together with the ever increasing archeological evidence which is supporting the complete validity of history as given in the Bible, lead us to the solid conclusion that the Biblical story of KST is quite factual though some of the recorded details may well reflect the embellishments of pride in an oral transmission over many generations.

The Hiramic Legend

The story of the death of Hiram Abiff and all the details related to it is called the Hiramic Legend. It appears only in documents of speculative Freemasonry and nowhere else. The evolution of the Hiramic Legend is very closely related to the evolution of the rituals of our Craft.

Our present day Craft rituals have their earliest recorded beginnings in the Old Charges of the operative lodges. These documents were set down in the British Isles over the period from about 1350 to 1700 A.D. There are now recognized about one hundred and twenty-five copies of the "Old Charges". The masonic scholars of a hundred years ago had only about ten of them with which to work. The later forms are generally somewhat expanded versions of a small group of early "Old Charges". There is a common pattern to these documents. The first section is a more or less legendary history of the development of the building art and of the operative craft of stone masonry and its established customs and regulations. The second essential part is sets of "Charges", "Articles" or "Points" given for the benefit of Apprentices in particular or stonemasons in general. The "Charges" consist of trade rules and regulations, notes on the Master-Apprentice relationship, and some rules of good behaviour and moral conduct.

These "Old Charges" appear to have had two specific functions in operative lodges. These two functions probably also applied for a short period during the transition from operative stone masonry to speculative Freemasonry. Firstly, a copy of the "Old Charges" - probably handwritten in earliest times was THE document which "regularized" an operative stonemason's lodge in the same way as our Freemason's Lodges are "regularized" by a Grand Lodge Warrant or Charter. Secondly, the "Charges" were required to be read when a boy was admitted as an Apprentice to the trade in an operative lodge, and probably read again when some years later he was passed to become a "Fellow of the Craft" or journeyman stonemason.

The story of the building of KST is a constant part of the history contained in these "Old Charges". However, none of these documents contain anything of the Hiramic Legend which is now so much a part of our Master Mason degree.

The first written indications of the use of a Hiramic Legend in speculative Freemasonry appears in Prichard's "Masonry Dissected" as published in England in 1730, Just shortly after the formation of the first Grand Lodge in England in 1717. This was one of the early exposés, and was written in the question and answer catechism form. This form of ritualistic document was in use over the period 1650 to 1750. These question and answer rituals are referred to as the "Early Catechisms". This form of instructional ritual will be recognized as continuing today in our openings and closings and in our examinations of candidates in the several degrees.

Thus, from shortly after the formation of the first Grand Lodge, the Hiramic Legend became an integral part of the ritual and traditions of Freemasonry. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that about the same time, the speculative system was evolving from a two degree to a three degree system.

Today in British Columbia we have two main distinct workings, both of which stem from English Freemasonry; the Ancient or "American" work and the Canadian or Emulation work. There is a very

noticeable difference in the use of the KST theme and of the Hiram Legend in these workings. More extensive use of both of them is made in the Ancient work. For example, in the Ancient work in each of the degrees the manner of wearing the apron is directly related to the workmen at KST. No such detail appears on that point in Canadian work. The Tracing Board lectures in the American work deal more extensively with the KST theme. The Hiram Legend is much more dramatically communicated in the American than in the Canadian work. However, the use of the names of the Pillars is exactly the same in form and manner in these two workings, and apart from requiring explanations of the names and of the use of the names of these Pillars in the catechism examinations, neither working includes any other portion of the KST theme in the examinations. There is no reference to the Hiram Legend in any of these examinations in either ritual.

Let us construct a possible explanation of these similarities and differences.

First, the similarities of the use of the names of the Pillars and the complete absence of the HU-antic Legend in the examinations. Both the "Old Charges" and the "Early Catechisms" use the building part of the KST theme in their historical sections. Hence, these similarities reflect some of our very ancient usages and customs and thus, understandably, form a part of both these rituals.

The differences could well be related to the historical origins of our two main forms of ritual.

The exact details of the form of ritual developed and used under the Grand Lodge of 1717 are not known. But it is known that a rival Grand Lodge was founded in London in July 1751 which claimed its ritual was based on the "old System free from innovation". The 1751 group, who called themselves the "Ancients" and who somewhat sarcastically called the 1717 group the "Moderns", claimed that the 1717 group had committed the cardinal masonic sin of "changing the ritual". It appears that William Preston's famous "Illustrations of Freemasonry", first published in London in 1772, was based on the Ritual of the "Ancients". Preston's work contains the Hiram Legend in the detail now used in our Ancient work, but, it is not clear whether a drama form was then used or whether it was still in the catechism form. In 1797, Thomas Smith Webb published in the United States a work titled "The Freemason's Monitor: or Illustrations of Masonry.", which was almost a direct copy of Preston's earlier "Illustrations". Webb's "Illustrations" is the immediate precursor of our present-day drama form of the Hiram Legend as practised in North America. In the "Bristol Workings" of Western England there is worked a similar drama form of the Legend. Some authorities suggest this Bristol form came from an early Irish working. This Irish working may also have been the basis of the "Ancients" working, because Laurence Dermott, who was an active member of the rival Grand Lodge of 1751 and its Grand Secretary, was an active Freemason in Ireland before coming to England. So it may be that our American working had its beginnings in Ireland and came to us via the 1751 Grand Lodge, then via Preston's "illustrations" to Webb in America by 1797. It will be noted that this route and its timing avoids contact with all the negotiations and compromises which led to the union of the Grand Lodges of the 1717 "Moderns" and the 1751 "Ancients" which took place in 1813 to form the present United Grand Lodge of England.

The Canadian work is a slight modification of the Emulation working which was developed by compromise and negotiation as the work of the United Grand Lodge of 1813. While it retains all the elements of the "Old Charges" and the "Early Catechisms" found in the present American work, the Hiram Legend is treated quite differently. It is not hard to imagine the pushing and pulling that led to the Emulation. work, and at present we just don't know which form of the Hiram Legend was the innovation in those masonically very active and formative years between, say, 1750 and 1800.

Those of you who are familiar with our ancient work may be able to suggest why a Fellowcraft ruffian in the Third Degree Drama appears to know the Master Mason's penalty and yet complains violently that those secrets have been withheld from him. Or those more familiar with the Canadian form of work may be able to suggest why "more zealous and expert Brothers", but still Fellowcrafts, knew how to use the F.P.O.F. and as Fellowcrafts, established those C. Ss., Ts., and Ws. which would distinguish---."

These are interesting questions Brethren, and answers to them seem to be directly linked to the evolution of our symbolic ritual.

The following books are suggested as starting points for further study:

1. Alex Home, "King Solomon's Temple in the Masonic Tradition", The Aquarian Press, London, 1972
2. Harry Carr, "The Freemason at Work", via Quatuor Coronati Lodge, London, 1976.
3. Mina C. and H. Arthur Klein, "Temple Beyond Time.", Van Nostrand Reinhold, Toronto, 1970