

Mystic Masonry: In Symbol, Ritual, and Allegory

An esoteric interpretation of Masonic symbols in the 3rd Degree

By Robert V. Lund

Introduction

Freemasonry is regarded by Masons as the science of knowing oneself. As far back in time as the ancient Greeks, the ancient Egyptians, even to Atlantean times, Mankind has sought to acquire knowledge of human nature, and the purpose of human existence. This has always led to an orientation of the seeker towards the Creator.

Freemasonry exists for just this purpose. This may be denied by many Masonic Brothers who have not meditated on our rituals, who have not heard the messages embedded in them wanting all Brethren to look behind the veil.

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“In the investigation of the true meaning of every masonic symbol and allegory, we must be governed by the single principle that the whole design of Freemasonry as a speculative science is the investigation of divine truth. To this great object everything is subsidiary. The Mason is, from the moment of his initiation as an Entered Apprentice, to the time at which he receives the full fruition of masonic light, an investigator—a laborer in the quarry and the temple—whose reward is to be Truth. All the ceremonies and traditions of the order tend to this ultimate design. Is there light to be asked for? It is the intellectual light of wisdom and truth. Is there a word to be sought? That word is the symbol of truth. Is there a loss of something that had been promised? That loss is typical of the failure of man, in the infirmity of his nature, to discover divine truth. Is there a substitute to be appointed for that loss? It is an allegory which teaches us that in this world man can only approximate to the full conception of truth. “

Albert G. Mackey

[see more in The Symbolism of Freemasonry

Illustrating and Explaining its Science and Philosophy, its Legends, Myths and Symbols

By Albert Mackey.]

The body of knowledge accumulated by Mystics, over time, is generally known as “The Mysteries”. This knowledge has been perpetuated through the millennia by various Mystery Schools, who impart this knowledge only to those who seek it. Part of this knowledge includes a greater understanding of the world and the universe. This covers not only the material world, but the vast non-material realms that exist beyond those of normal perception. In the past, this was generally understood by all, but in our modern material-oriented world, such concepts are ridiculed by many. The mystery schools teach initiates: how to come to know one’s true self (one’s highest consciousness at the centre of our being); the purpose of one’s life; the true nature of the universe; and the development of faculties to enable the perception of the non-material realms.

Freemasonry is *not* such a mystery school, but it is an offshoot of one or more of them. It does *not* teach the mysteries but does, through ritual, symbol, and allegory, strive to make Masons *aware* of these mysteries, to those who seek the light of truth.

There are reasons why every symbol and every allegory in Freemasonry should be deemed important to a Mason. As I have shown numerous times, the Craft is based upon spiritual teachings handed down over millennia and it should continue to unveil, to the seeker of truth and light, secrets that are far deeper than those written in any of our ceremonies. Knowledge can be preserved in symbols and, often, those that preserve them can be ignorant of what they preserve. This can be both a good thing and a bad thing. It is

good that knowledge can be preserved without comprehending it. It can be bad in that certain things may be ignored, or changed, because of this lack of understanding, thereby losing valuable knowledge.

Whether you are a disbeliever, a rationalist, or a mystic, it cannot be denied that Freemasonry contains teachings that are unquestionably linked to the most esoteric of human knowledge. For those who continue to search for the deeper meaning behind Masonic symbols, consider yourself more enlightened than those who do not seem to understand the words “veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

“What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.

.....

Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.” Carl G. Jung

The Craft’s symbolism is a system of great depth, and only appears simplistic when we view it superficially. But when we enquire candidly and industriously, the beauties of Freemasonry will unfold. As Preston wrote:

“Many of [Masonry’s] illustrations to the confined genius may probably appear dull, trifling, and unimportant; but to the man of more enlarged faculties they will appear in the highest degree useful and interesting. To please the accomplished scholar and the ingenious artist, Masonry is wisely planned; and, in the investigation of its latent doctrines, the sage philosopher will experience delight and satisfaction.”

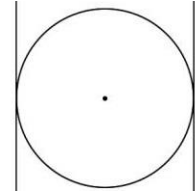
Let us now look at some of our ritual and symbols and try to determine what hints of hidden knowledge are concealed within them.

The third degree in Freemasonry is termed the Sublime Degree and the title is fully justified. Even in its exoteric aspect it leaves a lasting impression on the mind of every Candidate – it certainly did for me. But in its esoteric meaning, it contains profound spiritual instruction. The exoteric and esoteric are interwoven in such a profound way that it is almost impossible to separate one from the other. The more we study and analyse it, the more we realise the profound and ancient wisdom it conceals. Most Masons will never master all that lies hidden in this degree until the actuality of the allegory is realised at the time of their last breath.

The 3rd degree is full of rich, deep symbolism, from the opening words through to the final charge. Words in the opening prayer in receiving the candidate include menacing phrases such as “hour of trial” and “the valley of the shadow of death”, and words in the approach to the altar *as if stepping over an O. G.*, as well as the surrounding darkness impress upon the candidate the inevitability of death. It is a sobering experience for any man to truly realize that his days on earth are numbered, that he will eventually die. That is the intent of the symbolism in this degree, so that he might invest his time wisely and productively.

The Centre

A Third Degree Lodge is opened on the Centre. The centre is where, it is hoped, the genuine secrets of a Master Mason will be found, and from where a Master Mason cannot err. What is so important about the Centre?



In the ancient mysteries, the Circle is a universal emblem of Eternity and represents Spirit. To the Hindus, a point *within* the circle is the symbol for the concept of the Supreme Being, from whence we have come, and to where we shall all ultimately return. The Egyptian hieroglyph for Re, the supreme god, is a dot within a circle.

When drawing a circle with compasses, one compass point rests at the centre and the other point makes a circle, which is infinite, with no beginning and no end. No matter how far the legs of the compass are extended, or how large the circle is, one point is always at the centre. So, symbolically, as long as we have a connection to the centre, we "*cannot err*". The compasses should be considered as representing the Divine Spark in ourselves. The soul (S.W.) indicates that it is at the centre that we hope to find the genuine secrets, and the spirit (W.M.) offers assistance with the search. Theosophical, Buddhist, and Rosicrucian teachings all indicate that we find our Spirit at the Centre of our being and it is only from there that we can communicate with the Divine.

"Self-knowledge reveals the fact that the soul's natural movement...circles around something interior, around a centre. Now the centre is that from which proceeds the circle, that is, the soul. The soul will therefore move around the centre, that is, around the principle from which she proceeds; and, tending towards it, she will attach herself to it, as indeed all souls should do. The souls of the divinities ever direct themselves towards it, and that is the secret of their divinity; for divinity consists in being attached to the centre... Anyone who withdraws from it is a man who has remained unrefined, or who is a brute."

The Steps in the Third Degree

The true start of the Third Degree initiation begins with the steps to the altar. Steps are not symbols, of course, but are symbolic. The candidate is directed to take seven steps – the first three as if stepping over an open grave, and the last four direct to the altar. These steps are not described in the Antient Ritual, which is a pity since it contains a very important message related to this degree.

The candidate is stepping *over* an open grave, not falling into it – symbolizing that he will *overcome* death and he knows now that death is not the end, and he will then *continue forward* along his path of progress on the other side of it.

The number of steps to the altar represents the combination of the trinity of body, soul, and spirit, and the four elements representing matter. It is the same number as that which forms a perfect lodge and, more importantly, the seven aspects which form man, and the seven planes of existence, if we interpret it according to the ancient wisdom.

The Position of the Square and Compasses

The Master explains to the candidate the reason for the changed position of the Square and Compasses in the third degree. However, there is a deeper meaning: it indicates that the Spirit (represented by the Compasses) now dominates the body (represented by the Square).

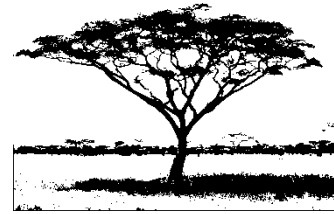
This represents the coming forward of the Spirit into personal consciousness so that the Mason can "work with both points of the compasses" and render the circle of his being complete by attaining conscious cooperation with his true self. In other words: the soul is now aware of, and can now work with, the spirit. This is an important point and can be better understood with basic Theosophical knowledge. Only when this has been achieved can the candidate truly embark on the spiritual path.

The Third-Degree Tracing Board



Acacia

At the top of the Board, we find the sprig of acacia. The Sprig of Acacia has three traditional meanings: Initiation; Innocence; and the immortality of the soul. The latter meaning is important in this context.



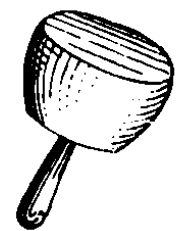
It stems back to many legends, such as that of Osiris. The acacia is intended to remind us, by its evergreen nature, of that better and spiritual part within us which can never die (the immortal principle).

Plumb Rule, Level, and Setting Maul

Towards the bottom of the tracing board can be seen the weapons of the ruffians: the Plumb Rule, the Level, and the Heavy Setting Maul.

Symbolically, the impatient ruffians (in the Antient ritual, referred to as Jubela, Jubelo, and Jubelum) represent aspects of our nature. These aspects seek rewards that we are not entitled to and for which we are not yet qualified. In the Antient ritual, they strike the throat, breast, and forehead. These relate to three points of spiritual energy (Chakras).

If we think about the allegory of the slaying of Hiram Abif, and the subsequent raising, as being the necessity of “killing” our current way of life in order to be “re-born” to a newer life, then we can think of the weapons as tools that we need to use in order to get to this state. The Plumb Rule is used to create rectitude or uprightness in our selves – to create a giving, forgiving character, full of mercy. The Level develops constraint, rigor,



and non-judgmental traits. Finally, the Heavy Setting Maul is the driving force, representing our will, which is required to finally quell our old bad characteristics.


Cryptic Inscription

Just below the working tools is an inscription written in a cryptic script. This inscription is written using the Freemason cipher (which also goes by other names such as the pigpen cipher, Napoleon cipher, and the tic-tac-toe cipher).

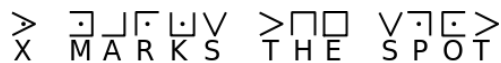
A	B	C	J	K	L
D	E	F	M	N	O
G	H	I	P	Q	R

This is a simple substitution cypher. Each letter uses the lines encompassing it.

S	W
T	X
U	Y
V	Z

Looking at the grid on the right, the letter A is written as .

The sentence below shows other letters:



 X MARKS THE SPOT

In this cipher, there are no codes for numbers, which are written as normal.

On the Tracing board, however, the script is written, as with Egyptian Hieroglyphic, in reverse, and from right to left. This means that the cipher table should actually be as below.

All characters are now a reverse image of the original. This includes numbers.

L	K	J	C	B	A	S	W
O	N	M	F	E	D	U	X
R	Q	P	I	H	G	V	Y
							Z

Looking now at the tracing board (see the diagram on the right), in the rectangular plate, we see the first line: $\sqcup \sqcup \sqcap$ for BAH or **HAB** (reading backwards). This is an abbreviation of Hiram A Bif.

On the next line we see $\sqcup \sqcup$ for LA or **AL** reversed. This is an abbreviation for Anno Lux, translated from Latin as The Year of Light. This is followed by the reversed number **3000**. This is, traditionally, the year of the death of Hiram Abif, i.e 3000 AL.



The rectangular plate is bounded on each side by the characters: $\sqcup \lt$ for CT or **TC** reversed. This represents the name used as the password in the Third Degree (T.....n).

Below the skull and crossbones are the characters $\sqcup \square$ for BM or **MB** reversed. In some tracing boards, there are two repetitions. This represents both words in the Third Degree (M...b... M...b.....).

Working Tools

Below the Acacia can be seen the three working tools of the Emulation Third Degree: the Skerrit, the Compasses, and the Pencil. Other jurisdictions use the trowel.

*The Skerrit Compasses and Pencil,
these three,
Are guiding our conduct for all men to see,
Each one should obey God's instructions divine,
If we would ascend to the Grand Lodge sublime.*

R.W.Bro. Charles Fotheringham.

Pencil

One that seems to be common to most is the pencil. The Emulation ritual states: *“the Pencil teaches us that all our words and actions are not only observed but are recorded”*. Most religions teach this concept, as part of their doctrine, to encourage people to do Good during their lives, as they will be judged by their actions and rewarded or punished, in the next life, accordingly. As the old saying goes *“you will reap what you sow”*.



The ancient mysteries have a similar teaching, called *“the law of cause and effect”*. This law indicates that the effect could appear in this life or the next. It is described as the law of absolute justice, an impartial law of Nature that cannot be escaped. This applies to deed, word, and *thought*. The Hindus, Buddhists, Rosicrucians, and Theosophists call it Karma, the Universal Law of Harmony. Theosophy teaches that our actions shape our destiny. This law operates whether or not we are conscious of it. *“By our ignorance, we bind ourselves through selfish actions, feelings, and thoughts”*.

One of the important lessons to be learned from this is that we can promote our own happiness and contentment by creating the same in others.

Skerrit

This an implement which acts upon a center-pin, whence a line is drawn, chalked, and struck to mark out the ground for the foundation of the intended structure.

Symbolically, it points to us *that straight and undeviating line of conduct* laid down for our pursuits in the volume of the Sacred Law. The foundation is our own individual character. On that foundation, we build the superstructure of honesty, integrity, loyalty, compassion, and brotherhood. More importantly, it is the foundation for our own spiritual temple, to be built straight and true, from the base up, towards enlightenment.

Compasses

We have dealt with the compasses previously and it is not necessary to repeat their symbolic meaning here.

Skull and Crossbones

The skeletal remains of Hiram Abif, represented on the tracing board as skull and crossbones, are emblems of mortality, and the second reminder to us to contemplate our “inevitable destiny” (our eventual death). We were first reminded of this when we stood at the edge of the grave into which we figuratively descended and which, after this mortal life shall have passed away, will, once again, receive us into its cold bosom. These are stark reminders that our short life in this world will come to an end. We are also reminded that we need to complete our tasks while it is “yet day”. We must finish the work before our demise.



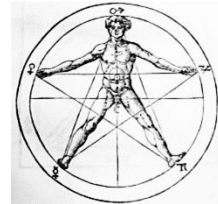
We are urged to lead our reflections to that most important of all human studies: the knowledge of ourselves. At the entrance to the sacred Oracle at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, ancient Greece, is inscribed the words “Know Thyself”. Thales, a Greek Philosopher, when asked what was the most difficult thing in life, replied, “To know thyself.” This aphorism is further elaborated as “Man, know thyself, and

thou shalt know the universe and God." At first thought, this might be understood to be that we should know who we are as persons – to understand our own strengths and weaknesses, the way we think and behave. However, this reflection, or contemplation, is a major component of all the Mystery schools, and has a deeper reference to those who embark on the spiritual path. People are meant to find their true selves by meditation and deep introspection, and finally, enlightenment. To know our true nature, our true Self, is the purpose of life. When we know ourselves truly and deeply, we know God, because the true Self and God are one. The Mystery schools teach that we are composed of seven bodies, all existing within the same space. The innermost, the one at the centre of ourselves, is our spirit (sometimes called the soul) and it is only through this body that we can be one with the Most High ("The kingdom of heaven is within you"). It is only through this part of us, at the centre of our being, that we can begin to understand the true nature of the universe and the realms beyond this physical world. It is only when we know this true self that we can obtain enlightenment, when darkness becomes visible, and then we can move from the unreal to the real. This concept of *the centre* is given to us in all the degrees, to emphasise its importance.

The doom and gloom is, however, eradicated when we are given to realise that, within our perishable frame, lies a vital and immortal principle. This concept is what the Master Mason Degree is all about. We are to understand that death is not the end but the entrance to a better life. The Acacia is another symbol reminding us of the unending cycle of life and death. Understanding the true import of this cycle is a key to understanding why we are here on this world. Reaching our centre in order to be in touch with the universe, and in communication with the creator, is our primary purpose in this life.

The Number 5

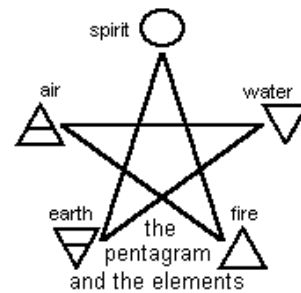
On the tracing board can be seen the number 5, repeated three times, at the bottom and middle edges of the board. These represent the three Fellowcraft Lodges who went out in search of Hiram Abif, to determine if he was alive or had suffered death in the attempt to extort from him the secrets of his exalted degree.



However, the number five brings to mind other meanings. In the American or Antient ritual, many words are devoted to a description of the five human senses. The senses help us to experience our physical existence in this life.

It is also an allusion to the five points of fellowship. These are five tenets, held most dear by all Master Masons, which define the behaviour between Brethren.

Five also refers to the pentagram and the five elements (four of matter and one of spirit): earth, air, water, fire, and the quintessential spirit. As the diagram shows, the material elements are subject to



spirit. The pentagram is not really used in Masonry except as the “blazing star”, which represents Divine providence.

In the Tarot, five is the card for the Hierophant (the Pope). The Hierophant symbolizes peace and harmony.

In numerology, Five represents love and marriage, balance, health. The Pythagoreans thought of five as the marriage between heaven and earth. Those who walk a Life Path with number five have an uncanny ability to understand the deepest esoteric and metaphysical teachings.

In nature, five is the pattern for growth of all things (leaves, trees, petals, shells, etc.)

The Furniture

In the centre of the Tracing Board, we see what are referred to in the ritual as the furniture of a Master Mason's Lodge: the Porch, the Dormer, and the Square Pavement.

The **Porch**, which is stated in the ritual as the entrance to the Lodge, is here the entrance to the Sanctum Sanctorum, which is the innermost part of King Solomon's Temple. In the second degree, we are shown the middle chamber but here, the pillars are the entrance to the innermost, most sacred part of the Temple. Traditionally, this is where the high priest, who had to be absolutely pure, communicated with the Creator. No one else could enter without being struck down.

The fact that Hiram Abiff was buried as near the Sanctum Sanctorum as possible, symbolically denotes that he had reached the centre, and was in union with the Source of All.

This represents our own true centre, where the purest part of ourselves, our spirit (which is the highest part of our sevenfold nature), resides and with whom it is our goal to communicate. This is the inner voice which guides us in all things. This communication can only be achieved through deep meditation.

The **Dormer**, as stated in the ritual, is to allow light into the Sanctum Sanctorum. The dormer window, or hypostyle, is the method by which Egyptian and classical temples obtained light. The pillars of the central nave or halls of such temples rose much higher than the roofs of the aisles, thereby leaving openings through which the light could enter the building. In reality, there would never be only one dormer. However, symbolically it is intended to represent the means by which the Divine Light penetrates into the deepest recesses of every man's nature.

The **Square Pavement** has already been discussed in a previous section and will not be repeated here.

Knocks

The different knocks used in the three degrees during the opening and closing of the Lodge are used to identify in which degree the Lodge is currently open. However, the structure or content of these knocks is also symbolic. They represent how the three main aspects of a Mason (body, mind, and spirit) are related in each of the degrees.



In the first degree, body, mind, and spirit are not working together in any significant way. They are shown as three separate entities as three separate knocks (. . .).

In the second degree, which places an emphasis on the moral and intellectual aspects of a mason, there is now a closer affinity between body and mind, while spirit has not yet been addressed. The Mason has learned to use his mind to master his base material nature. This is shown as a single knock (representing spirit) followed by two knocks (mind and body together . . .).

In the third degree, which now adds a spiritual aspect to a Masons existence, the material body is considered being of lesser importance. The mind is now more concerned with the spirit, and developing a spiritual nature. This is shown in the Lodge opening by two knocks (spirit and mind) followed by one (body ..).

The Brethren, on hearing these knocks in the various degrees, should place themselves in the appropriate frame of mind and state of reverence for that degree.

It should be noted that the same concept of the combinations of body, mind, and spirit, are repeated, to some degree, in the positions of the square and compasses in each of the degrees.

These are treated earlier in this book, but I will summarize them again: in the first degree, the square (body) covers both points of the compasses; in the second degree, one is disclosed; in the third degree, both points of the compasses are visible, covering the square.