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PAST MASTER

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PRESENTATION BY JOHN BRIDEGROOM

It has been said that we are a society with secrets, and not a secret society. I'm not sure the distinction really matters, other than from a good Public Relations stand point. One of my all time favorite quotes, found in the Hermetic teachings, is "The lips of wisdom are closed, but to the ears of understanding." What this means is that in essence we need not keep any secrets, for those who are not ready to hear the wisdom in Masonic Teachings, will not hear it even if we told it to them. This is echoed in the biblical notion of not "casting our pearls before swine." The masses will indeed endeavor to tear down that which they do not understand. Hence, Aude-Vide-Tace... Know, Dare and be Silent. Today I don't intend to get incredibly deep, but I thought it may be refreshing to take a look at some fundamental aspects of the Craft Degrees and consider some of their deeper meanings, to take a look at our Secrets and how they can be philosophically applied.

Many consider the Grips, signs and passwords of our Royal Art to be the secrets of Masonry, when in many ways they themselves are actually the KEYS to the secrets. There are some compelling arguments that examine the Masonic Signs as they relate to the stages of Alchemy, which I have no need to retrace here. Alchemy is often considered a parallel system to Freemasonry, with the process of Lead into Gold being similar to the Rough Ashlar to the Perfect Ashlar. Of course, we get cursory explanations of the Grips and Words in the degrees themselves, but certainly there is more value to them. Consider this wonderful quote by Masonic Scholar W.L. Wilmshurst on the subject of accepted Masonic Definitions:

“Anyone, of course, can understand the simpler meaning of our symbols, especially with the help of the explanatory lectures; but he may still miss the meaning of the scheme as a vital whole. It is absurd to think that a vast organization like Masonry was ordained merely to teach to grown men of the world the symbolical meaning of a few simple builders’ tools, or to impress upon us such elementary virtues as temperance and justice: - the children in every village school are taught such things; or to enforce such simple principles morals as brotherly love, which every church and every religion teaches; or as relief, which is practised quite as much by non-Masons as by us; or of truth which every infant learns upon its mother’s knee. There is surely, too, no need for us to join a secret society to be taught that the volume of the Sacred Law is a fountain of truth and instruction; or to go through the great and elaborate ceremony of the third degree merely to learn that we have each to die.” – The Meaning of Masonry

I am sure we all know the basics of the meanings behind our words and passwords. Beyond the elementary explanations, what more do they have to offer the inquiring student. What are they the key to, if anything? What do we know about the words of an Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft. That is to say, Boaz does mean Strength and is the Left Hand Pillar of Solomon’s Temple, and Jachin does denote Establishment, or perhaps Understanding as may be more appropriate, and is the Right hand Pillar of Solomon’s Temple. They do in fact allude to the biblical promise of God to “Establish his Kingdom in Strength”. But, on the surface these definitions offer nothing to the Masonic student. This instruction offers no guidance to make a good man better, and being such a central part of our craft it is conceivable that they point towards a deeper lesson.

There is, perhaps, another dimension to the instruction here. We learn about these two pillars for a reason. Not as a descriptive lesson of Solomon's Temple, but to make a substantial connection to another system with a similar goal. We initially learn about these two pillars, but we quickly find out that Masonry is not supported by two pillars alone, it is supported by three. Incidentally, we are also taught that of the 5 orders of Architecture, only 3 are revered by masons. These pillars are Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. They are represented in every lodge by the Master, Senior Warden and Junior Warden, or allegorically by Solomon, Hiram of Tyre, and Hiram Abiff.

The other mystical system I mentioned a moment ago that here shares a connection is that of the Kabbalah. Specifically here, the diagram of the Tree of Life from the Kabbalah. This Hebrew system, which can be a course of study unto itself, is a practice of searching within oneself to find God. It is an inward path to unite with the supreme creator. It is synonymous with the meaning of the phrase written over the ancient temples of the Mystery Schools, "Know Thyself". This same phrase adorns the Tyler's chair in the House of the Temple, home of the Supreme Council AASR SJ.

The Tree of life is also commonly represented by arranging the sephirot into 3 Pillars. The pillar on the left is the Pillar of Strength. The pillar on the Right is the Pillar of Understanding, and the center pillar is the Pillar of Beauty. It will not escape you, I am sure, that in the Third Degree you represent Hiram Abiff, who represents the Pillar of Beauty in the Lodge. So when you are initiated as an Entered Apprentice you are taught the Left Hand pillar of strength, as a Fellowcraft the Right Hand Pillar of Understanding, and in the Third Degree as a Master Mason you learn to balance the two and are raised as the Pillar of Beauty between them.

I am not proposing that Masonry is Kabbalah. I simply mean to suggest that Masonry, which teaches in Allegory, has deliberately pointed to another philosophy to teach the inward path. The symbolism in this regard increases in the Scottish and York Rites, which I believe are one continual school of knowledge necessary for all who are serious about our craft to study.

Lets look for a moment then, at the Fellowcraft Password. Again, its literal meaning is a wheat like plant, ear of corn, or can also mean waterway or stream. Hence we are told it denotes an ear of corn hanging near a waterford. Again a meaning that is useless in itself as a tool for the mason. Whence originated the word is a much more interesting question. The story of the word being used as a password, in which the ephramites were unable to say Shibboleth and instead said Sibboleth offers us a little more to investigate. That was indeed a fatal sin for the Ephramites. I mean this literally, as the first letter should have been a Shin, and instead they framed the Hebrew letter Sin and it cost them their lives. The letter Shin is associated with Fire in Hebrew, and it is interesting to note that prior the Ephramites threatened to burn Jephthah's house down with Fire for not including them in the recent battle. As a result, their inability to pronounce the Shin, the Flame, led to their deaths. Since that time, it became customary to use the word Shibboleth to denote a word or mannerism to distinguish a person of a certain group or practice. This is our first password, and it does two things. It becomes itself a Shibboleth, because we as masons use passwords to denote that we belong to the craft, and it calls our attention to the Hebrew letter Shin, which we will learn more about in a moment.

I find our next two words very interesting. The first is the Password of a Master mason. Tubal Cain is a strange choice at first, even though there is an attempt to connect it to the craftsman. Tubal Cain, we are taught, was the first known artificer or cunning worker in metals. He was a craftsman, but what does his craft have to do with stone masonry? Why would he be the namesake of my passage into our lodges? After all, are we not divested of metals at our first entrance? Indeed we were, to ensure that we brought nothing offensive or defensive into lodge! It was Tubal Cain who first made swords and spears as instruments of war. Yet it was also he who beat his swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks! It is this understanding, this transmutation, which is the progress you are expected to make in becoming a Master Mason. You are now capable of using these metals for building, not destruction. You have the creative fire to forge a positive future. Tubal Cain is indeed a fitting example to pass to the Stage of Master.

In Hebrew, the phrase “the Stone which the Builders refused” is Ehben Masu Ha-Bonaim. Some of you might recognize the substitute word in this phrase. It has been offered that perhaps this is what it alludes to, referring to Hiram Abiff as the Stone the Builders rejected, possessing merits unknown to them, which became the chief stone of the corner. Though interesting, one needs only to look at our own publications to discover the meaning of the substitute word. In fact, there is more than one substitute word! Ours, which I cannot say here without the appropriate positioning, is made up of 3 distinct words. In a Ritual book from the 1920s, the glossary in back clearly explains each. They in effect, translate to “What, the Builder?” Another version of the word in use in other jurisdictions still today is Mac Banach. It translates, in the same book, as “The Builder is slain”.

It is possible that this circumstance gives rise to a sort of catechism between jurisdictions, in which one states “The Builder is Slain”, and the other responds with surprise “What, the Builder?” This is fitting, of course, for a substitute word considering the cause for its creation.

The true word, which is discovered in the Royal Arch Degree, we will not treat here. But it is worth noting that although the in the Master Mason Degree the word is a substitute, nowhere does it say that the Grip is. In fact, it is the True Grip of a Master Mason. This is significant, and I will explain why. Every Master Mason is raised by the True grip. Though this grip may have never accompanied the True Word, as it has its own circumstances for communicating it, it would stand that the true grip would inculcate the same principle. This brings us back to the Hebrew letter Shin. The letter Shin, meaning Flame, is also used for Shadai, which is a name for God. Further, If you take the sacred name of God, Yaweh, and

you add the Shin in the middle, it become Yeshua, the name of the Son of God. In this way, we understand that the Shin, or the creative fire or active agent, allows God to manifest as Man. This is what the letter looks like. Have any of you seen this letter before? The hebrew Priests, when delivering the Prayer would often form the letter with their hand, as a holy and protective gesture. It looked like this. Have any of you seen this before? Live long and prosper right? Actually,

Leonard Nimoy was Jewish, and witnessed as a child the priests using this sign, and that is where he got the gesture from, cementing it into pop culture history. This symbol is the forming of the Shin with your hand, and therefore



forming the name of God with your hand. It is the position of your hand while forming the Lions Paw. Every Master Mason is raised upon the Creative Fire, this symbolic sign for God, and whispered to the substitute word informing him that the Builder has been slain.

Remember, at this time you were representing Hiram Abiff. Hiram, in the Allegory, is the architect and beautifier of the Temple. He is the Pillar of Beauty. With all of the allusions we have already discussed, the ruffians offer even further teachings. When we are being taught what it means to be a Master Builder of a Spiritual Temple, the Temple of our lives, we see the Creative Principle struck down by 3 things. The first, is Betrayal. He takes your hand as a Brother, and betrays the trust given him. Betrayal comes from the throat, the location of the first blow. The second destroyer of the Creative Principle is Fear. You are in danger, escape is impossible. Fear is in the heart, the location of the second blow. The final destroyer is hate and anger. Grant my request or I will take your life. Hate and anger are in the mind, the location of the third blow.

And thus, by Betrayal, Fear and Hate the Builder is slain, the Creative principle, archetype of beauty is destroyed. This is a fundamental understanding for those who would become Master Builders of their own lives. Only by the Creative Fire, the Shin, can it be raised again.

And so, every true Master Mason, every one of you, has represented the Builder, slain in defense of his integrity against betrayal, fear and hate, which he learned to protect against by the virtues of Tubal Cain. He fell between the pillars of Strength and Understanding, or wisdom, and was raised by the name of God as the pillar of beauty, Harmony of all three, a true Master Mason.