

Perspectives on the Symbolic Craft Degrees

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What you thought you knew

The symbols and allegories of our Symbolic Craft Degrees convey important lessons that emanate from time immemorial – but the symbolic representations, characters and dramas employed to convey those lessons and allegories are not always uniform across the entirety of the Masonic body of work. The first writings believed to be attributed to Freemasonry as we recognize it are contained in the *Regius Manuscript*, which dates from 1390, and informs us that the Saxon monarch known as Athelstan convened an assembly in the year 926. At this assembly, he compiled the articles and constitutions which became the landmarks and foundations of what we now know recognize as belonging to our beloved Fraternity[1].

While King Athelstan laid out the Masonic landmarks, the charter for the work of the operative guilds, and rules for ethical conduct, the associated rituals that the several constituent craft guilds adopted for initiating their members were generally ungoverned. Over time and with the influence of other esoteric orders, what would become modern Freemasonry would adopt myriad idiosyncratic rituals revolving around the core landmarks. It was only when the Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717, that those degree rituals and rubric began moving towards a more or less standardized form which was prescribed in *Anderson's Constitutions,* published in 1723.

Prior to this time, particular Lodges were left to confer only the Degrees that they had communicated largely mouth-to-ear with no governing body overseeing them to ensure homogeneity across Freemasonry. As such, we find considerable divergence, even to the extent where the underlying story is sometimes unrecognizable compared to what we are familiar with today – although the underlying lessons contained in each would generally provide a comparable experience and result for the candidate.

The *Edinburgh Register House Manuscript* from 1696 describes speculative Masons only receiving the grades of Entered Apprentice and Fellows of the Craft. It was not until 1725 when any record of the existence of a distinct Master's degree emerged. Within the Master's degree were contained elements of the Fellow Craft Degree which were taken and added to other ceremonial to form our current model consisting of three Degrees.[2] Following this milestone, several other haute, or "high degrees" drawing from other esoteric or occult origins were consolidated to the three craft degrees, forming new bodies such as the Scottish and York Rites.

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[1] Wikipedia contributors, "Masonic manuscripts," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Masonic_manuscripts&oldid=1183677567 (accessed December 12, 2023).

[2] De Hoyos, Arturo, *Scottish Rite Ritual and Monitor and Guide – Third Edition*, (The Supreme Council, 33°, Southern Jurisdiction, Washington, DC, 2007)



What does the Biblical Noah, and Hiram Abiff have in common?

An example of early work which has become more-or-less defunct emanates from a model of Freemasonry that some of us may not immediately recognize which is known as Noachite Masonry. Noachite is defined as relating to the Biblical Noah. This model of Masonry was described in a work known as the *Graham Manuscript* in 1726. According to the Noachite legend, following the death and burial of Noah, his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth, repair to his grave to attempt to obtain a valuable secret that he had. They also agreed that, should they fail to obtain that secret, a substitute secret would be adopted. When the brothers arrive at Noah's grave, they find his body nearly consumed by the earth, and attempt to retrieve the secret by raising Noah first by grips, then by a ritual embrace[3]. To this day, we can still find breadcrumbs of the Noachite legend in the York Rite's Royal Arch Degree, and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite's 21st Degree, each paying homage to the this now-defunct ritual.

Early manuscripts were often fragmentary

Existent foundational work that went into ritual was often segmented, confused, or unintelligible as the result of manuscripts becoming damaged, works composed in foreign languages being incorrectly translated, thematic elements being misinterpreted by their scribes, singular works being divided into multiple degrees and being later lost or separated, or multiple degrees being inappropriately conflated into new singular works. The early 1700's through the late 1800's represented a period of significant reform in the body of Masonic ritual work. Many orders were created aside from Masonry, such as the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians, Martinism, Theosophy, the Swedenborg Rite, Ordo Templi Orientis, and Golden Dawn, to name a few. Esoterism was a big business with a burgeoning population of eager clients trying to do everything from creating a better society, or becoming closer to God, to obtaining magickal powers. Each order consisted of several degrees – some numbering upwards of 100 degrees in a single order[4]. Invariably, these orders greatly overlapped in foundational content, with each order tailoring their individual degrees to suit their particular clientele[5]. Additionally, European and American

[3] De Hoyos, Arturo; Pike, Albert, *The Porch and Middle Chamber – The Book of the Lodge*, (Scottish Rite Research Society, Washington, DC, 2022) p 41-43

[4] At least York Rite breaks their very many degrees into distinct and appendent bodies and there aren't 100 degrees in any one body, lol! Being a ritualist would be murder on Degree Festivals!

[5] Lees, Alistair, *English Illuminati*, (Lewis Masonic, Shepperton, Middlesex, UK, 2019) p73-79

sources were often varied, for example, French artistic symbolic drawings might feature such elements as tassels & ribbons, temple buildings, niveaux (a.k.a. level), or pomegranates, where American artistry would more likely contain mosaic pavement, terrestrial/celestial globes, square & compasses, etc.[6] It is therefore clear that those charged with codifying Masonic ritual often had several sources and interpretations from which to draw their content from.

In the early days of Masonry, the notion of "open books," which we have today, where the whole ritual was displayed written out in plain English was not just verboten; it was simply non-existent. Despite the relative standardization and codification of Masonic ritual that had taken place since 1717, we have all taken obligations to not write any part of our work and consistently accurate dissemination of approved work to particular Lodges posed a problem. Recognizing this, an American gentleman named Thomas Smith Webb who lived from 1771 to 1819 compiled the basis for American ritual and traveled with his students throughout the States to teach the work to the Lodges. His students were encouraged to write their own ciphers based on the ritual, using initials or symbols to represent the individual words of the ritual – which, in itself, is not always a reliable means of retaining precise verbiage. Through his efforts, Webb is credited with stabilizing Masonic ritual; however, mouth-to-ear conveyance and cipher misinterpretation continued to propagate and perpetuate errors. To illustrate this point, let's consider one such error concerning the location of a particular sheaf of wheat: one jurisdiction would assert that it is found near a place where one might cross (or "ford") a river, where another jurisdiction would disagree and insist that it be situated near a certain feature of a waterway passing across a multileveled landmass[7]. In short – inconsistencies of symbols and interpretations continued and even worked their way into Grand Lodge ritual monitors which remain even today.

Further distinction

One of the most notable personages of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Albert Pike, greatly admired the value of the Symbolic Craft degrees, and is quoted as saying:

> …the purposes of the instruction of our Degrees [referring to the 29 Degrees of the Scottish Rite], is to cause the Blue Degrees to be held in higher estimation, upon legitimate grounds… To show beyond the possibility of contradiction that they have these profound meanings… which leads the Mason to the light of which he is in quest and vindicates the claim of Blue Masonry to veneration, as containing in its symbols the Ancient Oracles of Divine Truth.

Consequent to remaining evidence of the inconsistencies, deterioration of, and conflation of content afflicting the many degrees existent in the day and recognizing a need for further standardization of the Masonic body of work, in 1855, the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite, John Honour, 33°, commissioned a group of five Masons, one of whom was Albert Pike, to review and rewrite the work of all 33 degrees of the Scottish Rite, which included the first three symbolic craft degrees. Pike considered rework of the Craft degrees necessary, as it would address inconsistencies in Grand Lodges' ritual, and more closely align the degrees to the sequence and flow of the Rite's High degrees. It would also afford

[6] Franken, Henry Andrew, *The 1783 Franken Manuscript*, (Supreme Council 33°, A.A.S.R., Northern Masonic Jurisdiction, Lexington, MA, 2017) p25

[7] De Hoyos, Arturo; Pike, Albert, *The Porch and Middle Chamber – The Book of the Lodge*, (Scottish Rite Research Society, Washington, DC, 2022) p54-61

Pike the opportunity to more greatly emphasize the symbols that he considered essential. In 1868, Pike completed this work which was published four years later in 1872.

Since the Scottish Rite existed as a source of capitular degrees that were complementary and coincident to the Craft degrees and realizing that the actual "*conferral*" of the Scottish Rite's versions of the first three degrees would essentially constitute the support of clandestine work, the Supreme Council of the Rite decreed that the ritual would be distributed *for study only*. Of course, it came to pass that only ten years after their publication in 1882, those degrees had been actually conferred on candidates and the Supreme Council summarily withdrew all copies of their Craft degrees, forbidding their continued distribution. Supreme Council has since re-released the published ritual under the title of *The Porch and Middle Chamber* but continues to forbid the conferral of the degrees contained therein.

For those interested in the examination of ancient esotericism, I encourage you to obtain a copy this tome as it contains work generally uniform with the traditional Hiramic legend, however it incorporates a great deal of emphasis on occult hermetic and alchemical symbology, and numerology, and also incorporates several lectures powerfully admonishing the Mason to adhere to his duties to his God, his nation, and his neighbor[8]. One element that the author of this paper finds rather peculiar concerning Pike's interpretation of the Master Mason Degree, is the notion that the three brother craftsmen central to the drama are not brought to King Solomon, and their fate is deferred to degrees occurring later in the Scottish Rite's body of work. One point that can be argued in favor of Pike's revisions of the Craft degrees is that they more thoroughly explain the symbols and meanings of the degrees, albeit in Pike's usual, longwinded and verbose manner.

A word of caution

In this paper, we have touched on the history that led to the many varieties of interpretations of the Craft degrees and the effect of various influencers over several hundred years. These factors and the simple passage of time have created many versions of what is really the same collection of landmarks and obligations, but often illustrated by many different symbols. Because many of our symbols are frequently borrowed from other more mystical or even magickal schools, there are often people who ascribe other-worldly characteristics to our Craft; they believe that we are secretly driving the new world order and endeavoring to assume total control of the world. Well – I can tell you that this very subject came up in discussion at Lodge last month and I assure you that we'll get right onto that new world order thing… as soon as we have our "new world order fish fry" next month to make the money to do it.

In some cases, individuals from within our own Order are those who subscribe to these mystical claims. In the works of the Scottish Rite, we are often admonished to reject superstition and be careful to not confuse the symbol from the thing symbolized; not to confuse the Creator with the creation. In his book *Esoterika*, Pike states that:

> …there are esoteric proofs in the ritual that its symbols had higher meanings, philosophical and religious; but it retained, and retains to this day, as its organic law, the old Charges and

[8] De Hoyos, Arturo; Pike, Albert, *The Porch and Middle Chamber – The Book of the Lodge*, (Scottish Rite Research Society, Washington, DC, 2022) p91-100

> Regulations of Stone-Masonry. It clung to its old fictions, too, now known to have been no more veritable than the old Romances of Chivalry.[9]

Pike goes on to caution the reader in *Morals and Dogma* that:

> If we adhered to the literally historic sense, antiquity would be a mere inexplicable, hideous chaos, and all the Sages deranged: and so it would be with Masonry and those who instituted it. But when these allegories are explained, they cease to be absurd fables…and become lessons of wisdom for entire humanity.
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> And he greatly errs who imagines that, because the mythological legends and fables of antiquity are referable to and have their foundation in the phenomena of the Heavens, and all the Heathen Gods are but mere names given to the Sun, the Stars, the Zodiacal Signs, the Elements, the Powers of Nature, and Universal Nature, herself, therefore the first men worshipped the Stars, and whatever things, animate and inanimate, seemed to them to possess and exercise a power or influence, evident or imagined, over human fortunes and human destiny[10].

Let us not fall into that snare, Brothers, and realize that the many reflections of ancient mysteries embedded in the many faces of Masonic ritual are intended to provide for us a stratum that we may employ to illustrate and convey to our initiates that ineffable beauty of the Grand Architect of the Universe.

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[9] De Hoyos, Arturo; Pike, Albert, *"Esoterika" – The Symbolism of the Blue Degrees of Masonry*, (Scottish Rite Research Society, Washington, DC, 2005) p lx

[10] Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, 2nd annotated edition*, 2nd printing, (Supreme Council, AASR SMJ, Washington, DC, 2016) p712

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