

ON THE DEGREE OF A ROYAL MASTER

By R.J.Heteher.

The degree of a Royal Master is closely connected with that of the Master Mason. The degree of the Master Mason deals with the untimely death of our Grand Master, Hiram Abiff, while that of the Royal Master is concerned with the period immediately before that event. In each of these degrees there are two distinct aspects, the first being the historical legends and the second the allegorical interpretation of those legends. As we are all aware, the degree of Royal Master is centred around what is usually referred to as "the soliloquy". This isn't quite accurate, since a "soliloquy" is the act of talking to yourself. Perhaps we should more accurately describe the scene as a "discourse" So perhaps we should think of the actions of Hiram Abiff in this context as thinking out-aloud for the benefit of Adoniram, whom we all, at one time, represented.

It seems evident from the context of Hiram Abiff's remarks as he walks around the Sacred Sanctuary, that he is expecting his death in the near future. He doesn't say "if I die", but "when I die", and the feeling is that he is aware of what is about to happen according to the legend.

As mentioned before, the degree has two distinct levels, that of the legend and that of the allegorical meaning, and these are apparent from the very beginning of the ceremony. Here we have the candidate presenting himself to the Grand Master offering a piece of work for his inspection. This can also be interpreted as the Fellow Craft presenting himself in the hope of being elevated to the rank of a Master Mason; that is to be rewarded for his efforts by being given the Master Word. In other words the labourer is seeking his reward. We ought to understand that all this building that is going on refers allegorically to ourselves. That the Temple is our life, and that the reward we will receive in due time is understanding.

This is the symbolic teaching of the whole of Masonry from the first step to the last ... that there is a search for a Word, and that Word is symbolic of the Truth.

It has been asked, how could the first scene in our drama take place in the Sacred Sanctuary or Holy of Holies, when that place was to be entered only by the High Priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement? The answer from the point of view of the legend is that the Temple had not yet been dedicated and that the Sacred Sanctuary was still in the process of being completed. This can also be interpreted as meaning that we are in the process of completing that inner Temple referred to a little later in the story.

Hiram Abiff quotes two verses from the Book of Proverbs, as he stands behind the altar: "Remove far from me vanity and lies... etc " and it might be asked what the purpose of this is. In the Book from which this quote comes, it is said that the purpose of the Proverbs is, among other things, to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice and judgement; to give to the young man knowledge and

discretion. It also says that "reverence for the Eternal is the beginning of knowledge", and this is what Hiram Abiff demonstrates as he stands before the Ark making his devotions. He asks for two blessings, freedom from vanity and lies, and a state involving neither poverty nor riches. This latter phrase can also be understood to mean knowledge within his capacity to grasp, not a state of ignorance or poverty of understanding.

Death is on the mind of our Grand Master as he thinks aloud, walking around the Sanctuary with Adoniram, who is to be his successor.

Adoniram is anticipating that now is the time when he will receive the Master Word. Hiram Abiff makes it quite clear that the Word will only be given when the Temple has been completed. Hiram Abiff makes it quite clear that this ultimate prize is not something that is just given to us. "I don't know if you will ever receive it" he says. It is something each of us has to search for and understand in our own way .. " feed me with food convenient for me" .. or give me the beginnings of knowledge and wisdom. Our traditional history indicates that the Word will be deposited deep beneath the Sanctuary. "The allegory would indicate that deep within each of us is the possibility of making a great discovery and finally comprehending the Truth.

Death has been a preoccupation of mankind since the beginning, and the possibility of an existence after death has been a central theme in all of the major religions seeking to establish our place in the ultimate scheme of things. Common to all of these systems is a legend of a slain hero, and these legends were in existence long before the time and circumstances of our own mystery. Our martyr, Hiram Abiff, being Phoenician, would have been initiated into the mysteries and teaching concerning Adonis.

There can be little doubt that Solomon, and probably his father David, were also acquainted with these teachings. After all, there was a long and close association between the kings of Israel and Phoenicia. Hiram, King of Tyre, the other of our three Grand Masters, was the Priest-King of Phoenicia and therefore would have been the principal celebrant of the rites of Adonis. Hiram Abiff, may well have been the father of Hiram, King of Tyre.

Having mentioned the rites of Adonis, it may be worthwhile to make a brief mention of the subject and the connections with Freemasonry. Of particular interest for us is the fact that the centre of the cult was at "Gebal, a city of Phoenicia", the home of the "giblim", the "stonesquarers", twenty-two of whom, along with Adoniram and Ahishar, were employed in the construction of the crypts at the centre of this Order.

This is an area that the individual can further explore on his own account. Suffice it to say that the mysteries of Adonis, like those of Osiris in Egypt and Dionysus in Greece, presented the ideas of decay and restoration, represented by darkness and light, death and life, or something lost and later recovered. Hiram Abiff, as well as being an adept in the rite of Adonis, was also a scholar ... whose great skill in the arts and sciences caused him to be selected as the most suitable person to carry out the plans for the building of God's Holy Temple."

It is hardly surprising, in the light of all this, that Hiram Abiff should engage in the subject matter of the soliloquy or discourse with Adoniram who historically may also well have been a devotee of the teachings concerning Adonis. A fundamental difference in our system is that while Adonis, being an agricultural god, experienced an annual death and resurrection, our martyr experienced only the death. There is no suggestion anywhere in the Masonic rites that Hiram Abiff was raised in anything except a symbolic sense.

In fact our Royal Master Degree emphasises quite clearly that "death terminates the labours of a man". If there is an existence after death it will be quite a different experience from what we understand in this life. Our ritual paraphrases a portion of the Book of Ecclesiastes in saying "The dead know not anything; their love, their hatred, their malice, their envy is forgotten! Neither have they henceforth a portion in anything that is done under the sun."

There the noontide of bliss will eternally shine" .. in this context, "noontide" is not referring to the time of day, but to an alternative meaning, the highest or best, so that the phrase means that we hope to enjoy forever the highest form of bliss.

And if this eventuates, remembering that Hiram Abiff is expressing a hope rather than a certainty .. "My hope, Companion Adoniram" .. then there will finally be no doubts .. "the scales of doubt and darkness will fall from our eyes, and the wise purposes of the divine architect will be displayed in all their splendour."

The final challenge to a Royal Master, as expressed by Hiram Abiff, is to maintain his fidelity. This is the degree that indicates to us where we must search, symbolically in the ninth arch, which is the allegory for deep within ourselves. We are given guidelines for making the search, but the rest is up to each individual. If we make a thoughtful approach to this degree, and relate it to what we learn from the Royal Arch, we should be well on the way to understanding what the sages have been trying to teach us for millennia as is said in another place, "If thou canst comprehend these things, thou knowest enough."

The central symbol in the Royal Master degree is the representation of the Ark of the Covenant, the full description of which is found in the Book of the Exodus. This was of course the central symbol of ancient Judaism, but from the time of the destruction of Solomon's Temple, was replaced by the V.S.L. For our purposes, we need to understand that the Divine Presence, or "shekinah", was represented as appearing over the Ark; and, that the "bath kol", the Divine Voice, gave answers when the oracle was consulted. What all this meant is now part of history, tradition and legend.

For us these things could be made to refer to the charge given in the degree of Most Excellent Master, "Let the light of moral truth, virtue and uprightness shine through your example before all men, so that the brethren of this lodge shall never have cause to regret having received and acknowledged you a Most Excellent Master."

Finally, it is up to each of us to understand in our own way the allegory presented to us by the story of the Secret Vault, and realise that this is indeed within ourselves, and that understanding may be within our grasp.

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A Summary of the Lecture

- *The degree of a Royal Master is closely connected with both the Master Mason and the Royal Arch.
- *It is important to be able to distinguish allegory from history and legend.
- *Hiram Abiff appears to be expecting death in the near future as he instructs Adoniram in the philosophy of a Royal Master.
- *The presentation of the "piece of work" is allegorical of the Fellow Craft presenting himself for elevation as a Master Mason and so receiving "the Word".
- *The building going on is an allegorical representation of our own life, and at this point in the story the Sacred Sanctuary has not yet been completed. That is, we are still in the process of building that "inner Temple".
- *The prayer before the Ark represents a plea for knowledge and understanding within our capacity to grasp.
- *"The Word" will only be given when the "Temple" has been completed... all we can hope for at the moment is the "beginning of wisdom".
- *The "Secret Vault" is allegorical of our own inner being.
- * "Gabal, a city of Phoenicia" and the home of the "stonesquarers", was the seat of the Mysteries of Adonis. This was one of the many ancient mysteries concerned with something lost and then rediscovered.
- *Hiram Abiff, as well as being an adept in the rites of Adonis, was an accomplished scholar of great skill.
- *We are urged not to wait around hoping for enlightenment, but to "make an industrious use of our faculties".
- *The "adoration of the twelfth hour" is understood as the moment of the final call-off, when there is the hope of eternal bliss. This is reiterated in the S.E.M. degree.
- *The challenge to a Royal Master is to maintain his fidelity, and to search deep within himself for the meaning behind the allegory.