



Nugget

Jacob's Ladder

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Symbolism within Jacob's Ladder.

Summary

The symbolism associated with Jacob's Ladder, which is seen in the First-Degree Tracing Board.

Keywords

Jacob. Ladder, Heaven, Earth, First-Degree



Jacob's Ladder

Jacob's Ladder on the First-Degree Tracing Board represents the ladder which, as recorded in the Book of Genesis, Jacob saw in his dream: *'set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to Heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it'*. The ladder is not merely a Craft symbol as it is to be found in several of the additional degrees of Masonry.

It is not the only ladder to act as a symbol of oral, intellectual and spiritual progress. In fact, this idea of a ladder leading from earth to heaven may well be a common belief held by many. In the Lecture on the First-Degree Tracing Board 'the Ladder . . . the top of which reached to the Heavens' is said to have 'many staves or rounds' which symbolise many moral virtues; but the three principal ones are Faith, Hope & Charity. Those three virtues are described and interpreted at length, and we are told that the ladder rests on the Volume of Sacred Law, as seen in most illustrations of the First-Degree Tracing Board.

First-Degree Tracing Board by John Harris c,1825
Courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry.

Jacob's ladder was a prominent symbol in the early days of Speculative Masonry and was on many breast jewels in the mid 18th century. The number of rungs on ladders was generally seven, which has been considered a mystic or sacred number for thousands of years. There were seven days in Creation, seven sacred planets and seven ages in the life of man. The seventh son of a seventh son was considered to possess notable powers in folklore. Among the Hebrews every seventh year was a sabbatical. Stories of biblical characters, such as Elijah, Pharaoh, Jacob and Samson often relate to the number seven; it was also considered that man was composed of seven substances and has seven natures.

In Freemasonry, the number of steps in Jacob's Ladder should be seven, relating to Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice, Faith, Hope & Charity. There are some Tracing Boards with three rungs, but they are usually longer and some have extra thick rungs representing the three principal virtues of Faith, Hope & Charity.

The symbol of a key which appears regularly on or near the ladder is one of the oldest symbols in Freemasonry and is mentioned in one of our earliest Ritual documents:

Q *What is the key to your Lodge?*

A *A weel hung tongue.*

Many of the early texts expanded the 'Key-Tongue' symbolism, saying it was 'lodged in the bone box' (mouth) and that it is the key to the Mason's secrets. One of the best answers comes from 1700:

Q *What is the Keys of your Lodge Door made of?*

A *It is not made of wood, stone, iron or steel or any sort of metal but the Tongue of Good Report, behind a brother's back as well as to his face.*

As might be expected, the emblem of Jacob's Ladder has varied and elaborate explanations; it was supposed to lead the thoughts of the Brethren to heaven; its rungs each represented a moral and religious duty etc., but there is little doubt that the Jacob's Ladder in Freemasonry does point to the connection between Earth and Heaven, Man and God, and represents Faith in God, Hope in immortality, and Charity to all men.

##END##

Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

For further nuggets and other learning materials visit "Solomon" at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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