



## PAPER

### Jacob's Ladder - The symbolism within

**Summary:** A short explanation of the symbolism in Freemasonry associated with the Biblical story of Jacob's Ladder.

Of the many emblems and symbols to be found in Freemasonry, one of the most conspicuous must be Jacob's Ladder, which we see on the First Degree Tracing Board. It represents the ladder that Jacob saw in a dream, recorded in the Book of Genesis:

*'And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.'* (Genesis 28:12).

The ladder is a symbol found in several other Degrees of Freemasonry and in many other written sources as a symbol of intellectual and spiritual progress, such as in the Biblical stories of Elijah and Samson and in other religions and mythologies including those of Persia and Scandinavia.

In Freemasonry, the story of Jacob's Ladder appears in the Lecture on the First Degree Tracing Board. The Ladder is said to have 'many staves or rounds' (rungs) which symbolise many moral virtues, of which the three principal ones are Faith, Hope and 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 it does in most illustrations of the First Degree Tracing Board. This is because the Bible teaches us to believe in the dispensation of Divine Providence, and this belief strengthens our Faith, enabling us to ascend the first step.



*First Degree Tracing Board by John Harris (1845)  
©Museum of Freemasonry*



First Degree Tracing Board by Josiah Bowring (1819)  
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Jacob's Ladder was a prominent symbol in the early days of Speculative Freemasonry and featured on many breast jewels in the mid-eighteenth century. The number of rungs on these Ladders was generally seven, which has been a mystical or sacred number for thousands of years. For example, there were seven days of creation, seven sacred planets and seven ages in the life of man. The seventh son of a seventh son was especially blessed. Among the Jews, every seventh year was a sabbatical and the number occurs frequently in many Bible stories.

It also features in the notion that humans are composed of seven substances and have seven natures (and seven deadly sins!). All are derived from the ancient belief in the sacredness of the number seven.

In Freemasonry, the seven rungs symbolise Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice, Faith, Hope and Charity. However, some Tracing Boards depict just three rungs, which are usually longer, or have extra thickness; possibly because the artist found he did not have enough room for seven when he was painting the Tracing Board. In an Irish Ritual of 1796, the ladder is shown with eleven rungs. Early designs on Tracing Boards indicate the three virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, by the initials F, H and C between the rungs. Josiah Bowring,

a famous designer of Tracing Boards in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, introduced three female figures to replace these initials; Faith holding a Bible, Hope holding an anchor, and Charity with children nestling at her skirts. Several drawings of the late 1870s and later replace these figures with a cross, an anchor and a chalice with a pointing hand. The last of these is a depiction of the Holy Grail, which according to early Christian mythology, was snatched up to Heaven by God's hand.

Apart from the three virtues, one more symbol appears regularly on or near the Ladder; a key. Josiah Bowring depicts it hanging from one of the rungs of the ladder. The key is also one of the oldest symbols of Freemasonry, and is mentioned in one of our earliest Ritual documents, the *Edinburgh Register House Manuscript* of around 1696 and its sister texts. The Manuscript contains the following catechism:

Q: Which is the key of your lodge?

A: A weel hung tongue.

Many of the early texts expanded the 'key-tongue' symbolism, saying that it was lodged in the 'Bone-Box' (i.e. the mouth) and that it is the key to the secrets of Freemasonry. However, one of the best answers on this point is in the Sloane Manuscript dating from around 1700, which is the earliest Ritual document to contain the words 'the tongue of good report'. It includes the following catechism:

Q: What is the Key to your Lodge door made of?

A: It is not made of Wood, Stone, Iron or Steel or any sort of mettle but the tongue of good report behind a Brother's back as well as before his face.'

As might be expected, Jacob's Ladder has generated varied and elaborate symbolic explanations. In addition to those already mentioned. It has been said to symbolise leading the thoughts of the Brethren to heaven; or that each of its rungs represents a moral and religious duty. In Mithraism (a religion based on the worship of Mithra (Mithras in Greek), the Persian god of the Sun, justice, contracts and war, the seven-runged ladder symbolised the ascent of the soul to perfection, each rung being called a 'gate'.

In other Masonic degrees, the seven rungs represent Justice, Equality, Kindness, Good Faith, Labour, Patience and Intelligence, or Justice and Charity, Innocence, Sweetness, Faith, Firmness, Truth and Responsibility.

There is no doubt that, in Freemasonry, Jacob's Ladder points to the connection between Earth and Heaven, between Man and God, and represents Faith in God, Hope in Immortality and Charity to all men.



*Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia, Italy.*  
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- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
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  - Followed by 'any questions'
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  - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

\*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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