



PAPER

Be on your metal

A reflection from historical sources of the significance of metal in the First Degree

Summary: The rationale behind asking a candidate for initiation to remove all metallic objects before entering the Temple.

The Initiate stands somewhat bemused in the North-East Corner. The evening has been long and confusing. Well-rehearsed words flow around and about him. His attention however is suddenly riveted '*...secondly, to evince to the Brethren that you had neither money nor metallic substance about you for if you had, the ceremony of your Initiation thus far, must have been repeated.*' Why?

A short while later in the ceremony he is handed a quite obviously metallic chisel during an explanation of its moral symbolism. As the meeting closes, he finds from a crib that in the next Ceremony he will be asked to describe the mode of his preparation: 'I was divested of metal and hoodwinked...' Our Initiate being an intelligent man, asks himself what the connection with metal is all about in a society professing high moral principles; but no one ever tells him.

The Preston Lectures of the late 18th century provided one commonly accepted interpretation:

'Why deprived of metal? For three reasons: first reason, that no weapon may be introduced into the Lodge to disturb the harmony; second reason, that metal, though of value could have no influence on our initiation; third reason, that after our initiation metal could make no distinction amongst Masons; the order being founded on peace, virtue and friendship'.¹

The embargo though has been on everything metallic. Let us look at a Ritual of 1742:

'...he is deprived of all metal articles he may have about him such as buckles, buttons, rings, snuffboxes, etc. There are some lodges where they (even) deprived a man of his clothes if they are ornamented with 'gallant'. (a gold or silver thread)

Given our operative traditions of craftsmen with trowel in one hand and sword in the other there seem to be glaring inconsistencies here. If Preston's were the only reasons for excluding metal then a simple ban on weapons and potential gifts of money or jewellery would surely serve our purposes admirably. There must be more to it. A Worshipful Master is instructed to seek guidance from the Volume of the Sacred Law:

'And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.' Exodus 20:25.

'And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, whilst it was in building',
1 Kings 6:7.

There seems to be a clear link here between the presence of iron and the pollution of a Temple or other holy place. Certainly, in the First Millennium BCE, base metal was widely considered the ultimate pollutant and suspicion of those who worked it can be found in the widespread legends and folklore of many cultures. i.e. Wagner's Ring Cycle, the Norse Legends etc. This cultural sense of pollution by metal may suggest an explanation more sophisticated than Preston's and which may well be found in the bible:

'Now no blacksmith could be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears." So all Israel went down to the Philistines, each to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, and his hoe. ... So it came about on the day of battle that neither sword nor spear was found in the hands of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan,...' 1 Samuel 13:19–22 (New American Standard Bible 1977).

The production of wrought iron required great craft skills and, given the very high temperatures and flux required, the almost magical ability to transform iron ore into wrought-iron with a hardened cutting edge was jealously guarded, normally handed on from father to son within a long-settled community. It follows that nomadic pastoral communities like the Twelve Tribes of Israel would have neither the tradition nor knowledge of working iron, and in the interests of their own security the occupying Philistines would have ensured that it remained that way.

This then was the problem. The metal smiths around Jerusalem could only be Philistine. As they worshipped 'false gods' and idols their presence would pollute the purity of the Israelis' place of worship. If the smiths could not work in the Temple of Solomon it followed that nothing metallic could be used on site.

Our conclusion then may be simple. Speculative Freemasonry uses the imagery of the building of the Temple at Jerusalem to assist in a Mason's moral development. As the presence of metal polluted the construction of the original Temple so the presence of metal in our own ceremony symbolises to the Initiate a requirement to eliminate those influences in his own life that might restrict (or 'pollute') the development of his own Masonic moral temple.

Endnotes

1. Preston W., *The Collected Prestonian Lectures 1925-1960*, 1st Lecture, Section ii, Clause 1, London, 1965, ARS Quatuor Coronatum. William Preston presented his Lecture on the First-Degree of Freemasonry at a Gala Meeting, attended by a number of Grand Officers and other distinguished Brethren, held at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, Strand, on 21st May, 1772.

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- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - 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.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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