



Paper

Ashlars - Story of A Stone

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The symbolism of the Rough and Perfect Ashlars

Summary

The symbolism of the Rough and Perfect Ashlars, applied to both to Mason and to Lodge.

Keywords

Ashlar, Stone, Rough, Smooth, Perfect

Ashlars - The Story of a Stone

An eminent sculptor was once asked: *'How do you carve such beautiful statues?'* He replied: *'It is the simplest thing in the world. I take a hammer and chisel and, from a massive, shapeless rock, I knock off all the stone I do not want, and there is the statue. It was there all the time.'*

In every Masonic Lodge Room there is, or should be, a Rough Ashlar and a Perfect (or Smooth) Ashlar. What is their significance and what have they to do with Freemasonry?

In our ritual work, we are taught that the Rough Ashlar 'is a stone as taken from the quarry in its rude and natural state'. It is not a stone that was merely picked up somewhere, it has been selected. Some work was done on it. It was apparently a good stone, with good prospects of being able to be made into a Perfect Ashlar. If it had not been a good stone, it would never have been quarried. So it is with our prospective Candidates. They cannot be merely picked up somewhere, they must be selected. Before they are ready to be Initiated, some work must be done on them. They must pass some basic tests to show they are made of good material. They must show good prospects of being able to be made into good Freemasons. If they were not good men, they would never have been proposed for membership.

In changing a Rough Ashlar into a Perfect Ashlar, the workman takes away, he never adds. He chips away the rough edges and removes the visible flaws. He takes that which is already there and develops it into the Perfect Ashlar.

The block of marble from which the Venus de Milo was carved by an unknown Ancient sculptor had lain since the beginning of time in the rock of the Greek island of Milos. A common, unknown workman may have cut it from the quarry, but it took a master sculptor to carve it. It took a good piece of marble and a skilled artisan to produce a beautiful statue.

Not many Masons can make a Perfect Ashlar. So there are not many perfect Masons in our Lodges. Our ritual and other work can take away much of our roughness, sharp points and visible defects. We can produce as good a Mason as possible within our power. But the essential thing is to have good material upon which to work.

This statement is applicable to all mankind, but to us as Symbolic Masons, it is pregnant with meaning, for, each of us, at the start of our Masonic journey, was placed in the North-East Corner as an example stone, in the hope that, in the fullness of time, we would be wrought into a thing of beauty acceptable to the builder.

The poet R. Lee Sharpe (1872-1951) wrote:

*'Isn't it strange how princes and kings,
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
and common people, like you and me,
are builders for eternity?*

*Each is given a list of rules;
a shapeless mass; a bag of tools.
And each must fashion, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone'.*

These are very true words. The 'bag of tools' is the talents with which God has blessed us, to enable us to fulfil our mission in life. We are told in the Volume of the Sacred Law that one man received five talents, another, two talents, and another, only one talent, so our duty is for each of us to discharge his allotted task to the best of his ability, and help those who have not been so well blessed as himself. Thus each of us will be assisted in carving out the 'Grand Design' of being happy and communicating happiness and thereby of being more 'extensively serviceable to his fellow creatures'. The 'shapeless mass' is our character, and each of us is his own architect, builder and material, and like our predecessors, the Operative Masons, we each must show our craftsmanship in working out a Perfect Ashlar, fit to be tried by the square of our own consciences. The 'list of rules' is the Volume of Sacred Laws, the '*great light that will guide us to all truth, direct our steps in the path of happiness, and thus, point out the whole duty of man*'.

The Ancient Charges recount how a mould stone was given to a visiting Operative Mason to enable him to demonstrate his craftsmanship. The stones were selected from the quarries to suit the requirements of the building. As Speculative Masons, we obtain our mould stones from the quarries of life. Thus, when we receive an application for admission to our Lodge it is our duty to carefully scrutinize all the credentials of the applicant from every angle, so that only 'approved material' is admitted to the Craft. Freemasonry can and does improve good material, but it cannot make bad material good. As with the Operative Mason, poor material would have endangered the building. So with us as Speculative Masons, a faulty Ashlar will endanger the spiritual temple we are endeavouring to build. Having found, by making the strictest enquiries, that the applicant (or mould stone) is suitable, we have, by those enquiries, knocked off some of the irregularities which surrounded him, and after his Initiation, he is represented by the Rough Ashlar, that is, no longer a mould stone, but an approximate a cube which still requires a considerable amount of dressing to become a Perfect Ashlar.

In this process, we discover that, although the gavel and chisel can help to reduce roughness, they are not capable of achieving perfection. As a Craftsman we receive another set of working tools, one of which, the Square, is essential to achieving perfection. We learn that it is only by continual grinding and application of the Square that the stone can be shaped into a perfect cube. As Craftsmen and men of the world, we are continually coming into contact with our fellows and learning to control our passions and to recognise the rights of others, with the result that the stones we are working on, namely, our characters, are gradually taking shape as Perfect Ashlars.

Later, we are called upon to hand our stones over to the Builder, who cuts a bevelled hole at the top, so that they can be attached to a lewis and be hoisted up, ready to be placed on the base assigned to them by the Builder. Thus, we are reminded that the rope, the lewis, and the crane represent the all-sustaining power of God, and that if we have discharged our duty faithfully and in accordance with the precepts laid down in the Volume of Sacred Law, we may rest assured that, when the final summons comes, we will find that the Great Builder will have prepared a place for us in that *'Great Spiritual Temple not made with hands eternal in the Heavens'*.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- 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*).

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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