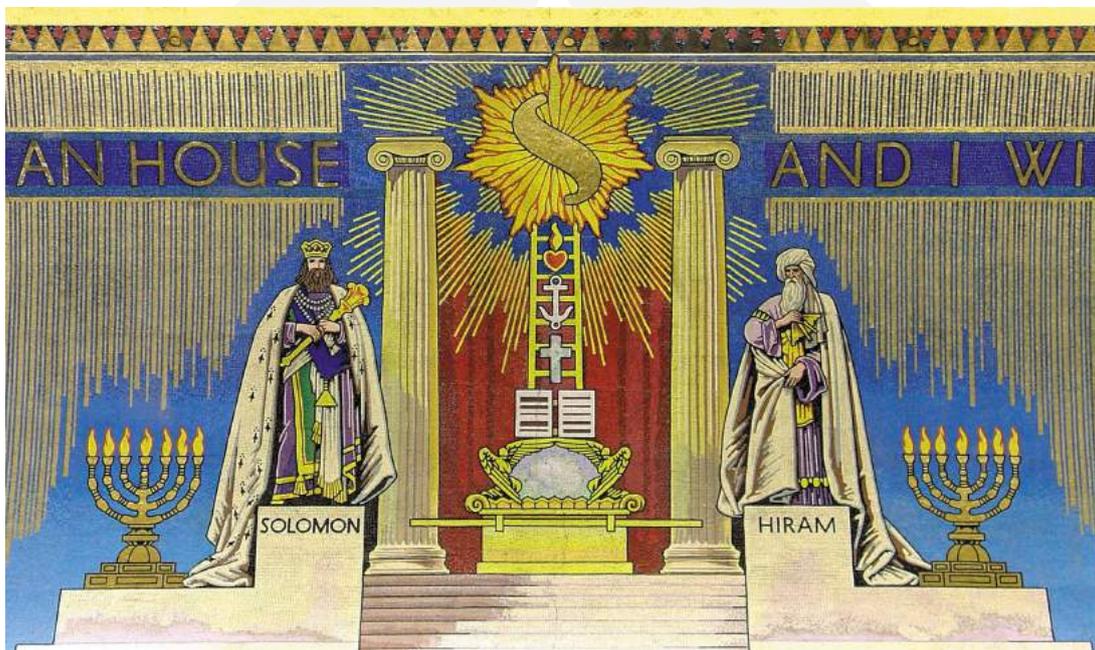




# PAPER

## Traditional History

**Summary:** The legend of Hiram Abiff.



Solomon and Hiram depicted on the ceiling of the Grand Temple at Freemasons' Hall, London.  
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The Traditional History, containing certain of the secrets of the Third Degree, is an integral part of the Ceremony of Raising, which should be given in its entirety on every occasion that it is worked. It is considered to be of such importance, that the Grand Secretary will not register any Brother as having received the Third Degree until it was established that he had received it.<sup>1</sup> So, what is so special about the 'Traditional History'? It will spoil no new Mason's pleasure to reveal in advance that the History focuses on the circumstances of the death of an Old Testament character named Hiram. Who was he?

His name first appears in 2 Chronicles, 2:13–14, in relation to a formal request from King Solomon of Jerusalem to King Hiram of Tyre, for workers and materials to build a new temple. King Hiram responds,

*'And now I have sent a skillful man, endowed with understanding, Hiram my master craftsman (the son of a woman of the daughters of Dan, and his father was a man of Tyre), skilled to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, stone and wood, purple and blue, fine linen and crimson, and to make any engraving and to accomplish any plan which may be given to him, with your skillful men and with the skillful men of my lord David your father.'* (NKJV)



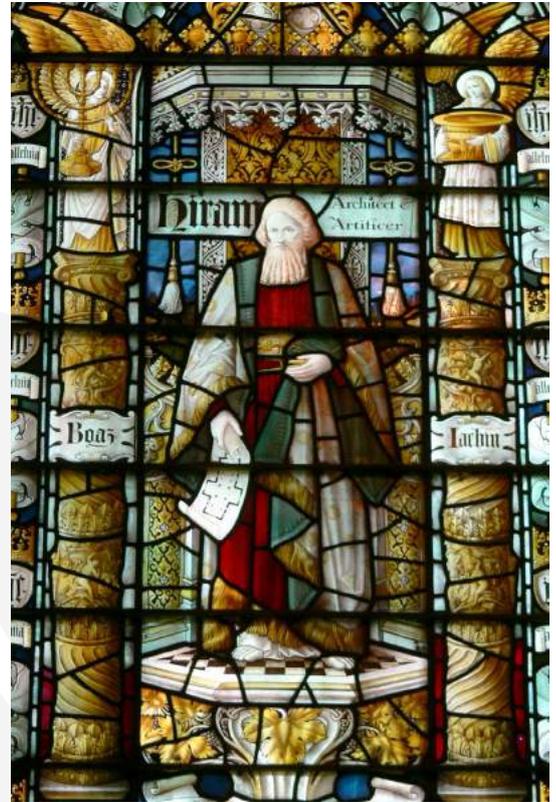
1 Kings 7, confirms this account:

*'And king Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass: and he was filled with wisdom, and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass. And he came to king Solomon, and wrought all his work'. (1 Kings 7:13–14)*

*'In the plain of Jordan did the king cast them, in the clay ground between Succoth and Zarthan'. (1 Kings 7:46)*

This Chapter in 2 Kings then describes in detail the many objects that Hiram made for King Solomon (2 Kings 7: 15–47). It may be significant however that they were all made of bronze, not stone or wood. Hiram then was a specialist in metals; nowhere in the Bible is there any specific evidence, or suggestion, that he actually constructed or designed a building). Other than the Bible, the only other contemporary source is the admirable 1<sup>st</sup> century history by Flavius Josephus, who in his *Antiquities of the Jews*<sup>2</sup> refers to Hiram as an 'artificer', again not as a builder or architect.

*'Now Solomon sent for an artificer out of Tyre, whose name was Hiram, who was of the tribe of Naphthali on the mother's side ... but his father was Uriah, of the stock of the Israelites.'*



*Stained glass window in St John's Church, Chester, (1900) showing Hiram, the architect of the temple in Jerusalem. Wolfgang Sauber [CC BY-SA]*

The catechisms of the early operative masons are not helpful either. The reliable Halliwell Manuscript (1390) contains no mention of Hiram, and he is absent from other comparable early literature. We might reasonably assume then, that he played no part in Operative Masonry. In 1737 the Chevalier Charles Ramsay, in a famous Lecture, argued a case for introducing a noble and chivalrous element into an otherwise artisan Craft Freemasonry. Subsequently, Grand Lodge created a third 'Master Mason Degree' out of the first two Degrees in 1738. We can only assume that Hiram Abiff first emerged into Speculative Freemasonry sometime later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to introduce the concept of honour; Hiram preferring death before dishonour. His noble death then became the centre of the Third Degree's Traditional History, written in its present form by the Lodge of Reconciliation, and approved by United Grand Lodge in May 1816.

Having emerged as a symbolic Masonic character, it is only fair to point out that his life and death quickly became featured in several other Degrees; the Rosicrucians, the York and Scottish Rites, and the 'Blue Lodge' Degrees. His origins and significance have been studied extensively in the United States. American authors were quick (and imaginative enough) to propose Hiram as a rival to Solomon for the hand of the Queen of Sheba; as an archetype for the classical Osiris and Isis; and not least, to his actually being a Christ-like figure within some Degrees blessed with his resurrection after the murder.

So we return to the two basic questions. Firstly why in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, did those creative Grand Masters who were also eminent early scientists as well as religious scholars, decide to introduce the shadowy Hiram into their new Third Degree? Secondly, and noting the slender detail supporting Hiram's history, why might the United Grand Lodge today be so insistent that the Hiram Legend should continue to form a mandatory part of a Freemason's education?

To answer the first question some contemporary evidence is available. If an operative mason told tales or sold secrets, and it became known, he would never work again as a mason. He would be 'blacked'. But this was not feasible for the wide range of educated, wealthy and aristocratic or professional members of the speculative Lodges. These were difficult times, and the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion was fresh in the memory. Shortly after the formation of the 'London' Grand Lodge in 1717, it was recognised that there were no sanctions in Speculative Freemasonry against the revelation of Masonic secrets by the affluent and non-operative members or their 'insensitive' discussion outside the Lodge walls.

In those days an honourable man would keep both his word and his secrets, and his personal honour was so highly prized he would defend it to the death with his duelling sabre or pistol. There could be no greater sanction than that. The Hiram story was able to gently depict and then ram home this over-riding principle of death as being preferable to personal dishonour; thus Masonic secrets would remain secure.

### **After-thoughts**

It could well be that the above moral has indirectly influenced UGLE today. The Traditional History in the Third Degree is still needed to explain the tokens and words but, perhaps more importantly, the story of Hiram reminds us that every Brother should strive for the highest of ideals, regardless of the personal cost, and behave honourably one with another, each keeping his word and meeting his obligations in the turbulent and confusing moral climate swirling around us today. Such a reminder is surely sufficient reason to keep the story in our rituals even three centuries later!

### **References**

1. *'...the Traditional History of the Third Degree, containing as it does certain of the secrets of the degree, was an integral part of the Ceremony of Raising. It therefore instructed the Grand Secretary not to register any Brother as having received the Third Degree until it was established that he had received the Traditional History. 'It therefore trusts that the Grand Lodge will endorse its recommendation that the Third Degree be given in its entirety on every occasion that it is worked.'*  
(Extract from Report of Board of General Purposes, adopted 11 June 2014).
2. Josephus, F., (1889), *The works of Flavius Josephus, Vol. II, Antiquities of the Jews, Books VII – XIII*, ch.3, v.4, p.85, Shilleto, A. R.(Ed), George Bell & Sons, London.

## 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).

\*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation 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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## Acknowledgement:

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