



Paper

Hiram Abiff

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Hiram Abiff and his place in the Third-Degree.

Summary

A description of the origins of the Third-Degree and the emergence of Hiram Abiff, the 'Prince of Architects'.

Keywords

Third-Degree, Solomon, Temple, Architect, Hiram

The Third-Degree and the allegorical symbolism of Hiram Abiff

It is much easier to say what we do not know about the Third-Degree in Freemasonry than to be precise about how it came to be. We know that Medieval Operative Masonry had only Two Degrees whereby a man might become a Member of the old Guilds of Masons. These were the Apprentice and Craftsman's Degrees. A young man would be apprenticed to learn the skills and arts (known in the Middle Ages as 'mysteries') and he would be bound by oaths to serve his teaching Master and not to give away his trade secrets. Some seven years later, having learned the craft of Masonry, he would be admitted as a 'fellow-of-the-craft'. He would once again be bound by oaths to support and uphold his fellow Craftsmen. Much of the language and ceremony of this oath taking would have been derived from the day to day practice and sign language used by Masons as they worked, and in time the ceremonial oath taking became more and more ritualised and stylised. Various documents came into being associated with these ceremonies, and these became known as 'charges'. These so called 'old charges' detailed the obligations of trainee and Craftsmen Masons, but also grew to encompass wider moral and civic duties as well. The ceremonies themselves would have taken place within the jurisdiction of local Masons' Guilds, though as the Craft had, by its nature, to be peripatetic the basic obligations must have been quite common. So that anywhere a Craftsman went, he would be subject to the same requirements as to proving his skill and knowledge. So there were signs, tokens and words developed to show that a man had that requisite degree of the Craft he professed. These guarded the secret knowledge the man had of the operative trade and guaranteed his acceptance by fellow Craftsmen.

Even when non-working Members were admitted into the ranks of Masons; possibly as early as the 15th Century, and certainly by the 17th Century. At a time, when the non-operatives would have outnumbered the working Masons and the old structure had become a part of an established pattern of organised sociability for educated men. Though even the Two-Degree structure was maintained - that was the structure Elias Ashmole the first recorded non-working English Initiate into English Freemasonry would have known in the 1640's and continued throughout the remainder of the Century. Much of the material we now have in our Three-Degree system would have been part of the earlier Two-Degree structure, but it has since been divided up, added to, and re-ordered over time. Hence, it is thought that the 'Five Points of Fellowship', whose very name is redolent of the Fellowcraft Degree, were part of the old second and final degree. Being at the time, *'hand to hand, foot to foot, knee to knee, breast to breast and ear to ear'*, at which point a word would be communicated to enable a Fellow-of-the-Craft to prove himself to other Masons. But in those days there was no Third-Degree.

So inevitably, questions arise as to who created this Degree, and where and when was it created? In fact nobody knows who, where and when. Some argue the Degree arose in Scottish Masonry and then spread to England, others argue exactly the opposite. What does seem established, is that the Degree was in use by the end of the 1720s; for it appears in an 'exposé' (an unauthorised publication of Masonic ritual) of 1730. It is also known that a continental aristocrat, the Duke of Lorraine, was at an 'occasional' Lodge at Houghton Hall in Norfolk in 1731, when he was Raised to the rank of Master Mason in the presence of many notable gentlemen. Such an event would not have taken place had the Third-Degree not been well established by then.

We may, however, be on slightly firmer ground if we ask ‘why’ the Third-Degree exists and what it is meant to signify. To begin our task, we must go back to the early years of the 18th century. There were a number of Lodges of what we may call ‘gentlemen Masons’ particularly in London, who contained men of learning and influence within the professions of the day; especially within the magistracy. Many of these men were also connected with the Royal Society of London and bore the highly esteemed title, ‘FRS’ (Fellow of the Royal Society). Current Masonic scholarship argues that it was from amongst these men that the idea of a governing structure developed and with it, the formation of the ‘Grand Lodge of Westminster’; soon arrogated to the title of ‘Premier Grand Lodge of England’. The traditional date for this development is accepted as 1717; though that, it too is open to question. The progenitors of the Grand Lodge concept were also able to attract aristocratic patronage for their system, and thus ensured its social acceptability and prestige amongst the governing classes of the day.

Thereafter the pace of change within Masonry increased rapidly and by 1723 a series of ‘Constitutions’ based on but also going way beyond the ‘old charges’ of operative days could be issued. Even so that first ‘Book of Constitutions’ contained no mention of the Third-Degree; though before long it became an established part of Masonic ritual. Even though Masonry and the Grand Lodge concept were established, however, it was still the case in the 1720’s that it was in many ways a fledgling organisation. It needed a philosophical basis and legendary history to support its claims to significance and desirability as a membership society. Now given that the originators were men of learning and science, who subscribed to the scientific argument. It was thought that by observation, measurement and experiment, the hidden mysteries of nature and science created by the Creator of the Universe could become known, and indeed it was His Divine Will that they should be. They also believed in the ‘perfectibility of humanity’, the possibility for an individual to improve himself by the acquisition of knowledge, and the creation of a better society.

The model for their thinking was what they conceived of as the World’s perfect building, one in which the Creator’s will and wisdom was revealed. That building was King Solomon’s Temple. King Solomon provided the motive force, but it needed an Architect, indeed the ‘Prince of Architects’ to create it. Enter Hiram Abiff. Our ‘Hiram’ is loosely based on ‘Hiram’ or ‘Hiram Abi’ (which could mean ‘Hiram my father’), a man mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. We learn he was said to be from the tribe of Naphtali, the offspring of a widow whose husband was a skilled bronze worker of Tyre (I Kings 7:13-14). We learn that he was sent by Hiram King of Tyre to King Solomon, as a man who is adept in working gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone and wood, colours and dyes and fine linen; someone who could work up any plan. (II Chronicles 2:13-14) In the 1723 Constitutions it was argued that ‘A’ biff’ was a surname, so we know he was a character known in Masonry; though not to the extent to which his fame later grew, alongside the notion of the Temple becoming central to the identity of Freemasonry. Furthermore, in Pine’s printed list of Lodges meeting in London issued in 1725, the Frontispiece depicts Hiram Abiff holding a square and showing a plan of the Temple to King Solomon and his household. So, within that very short space of time Hiram Abiff has emerged as a central figure in the symbolism of Freemasonry.

The Hiram legend as developed in the early years of the 18th century gave Freemasonry a claim to great antiquity and a dramatic character that was highly intense, even more than the content of the previous Two-Degrees. Indeed, there is an argument put forward by some students of Masonic History that the Third-Degree Ceremony was based on an old Mystery Play which may date back to Medieval Times, and it is certainly the case that some of the signs used in the Degree reflect late 17th Century and early 18th Century stage techniques, while others reflect the technology of the age. Thus the 'Sign of Horror' is a stylised gesture which would have been 'stock in trade' to any actor of the period, and can be seen in contemporary prints of stage productions of the time. Likewise, the 'Sign of Grief and Distress' as now said to be given in the States of America, mirrors the way in which sailing ships indicate they are in trouble by lowering the yard-arms on their masts. All of that was laid onto material which was previously in the 'old' Second-Degree Ceremony, such as the 'Five Points of Fellowship'.

But in all of this, why is there so much emphasis on Hiram Abiff? Quite simply he is Freemasonry's heroic figure. In the Third-Degree Ceremony it emerges that Hiram was a man intensely loyal to his Royal employer. This served to reinforce the Craft's claim to be patriotic and a supporter of the Royal House of Hanover, which it must be remembered had a rival in the former House of Stuart, which still maintained its claim to the British Throne throughout the 18th Century. Hiram is also portrayed as faithful unto death and someone of total honesty and integrity of character. This man is truly a paragon, because he combines great technical knowledge with outstanding moral courage. Hiram Abiff is an exemplar of how to live respected and die regretted, and every Candidate for the Third-Degree has that most forcefully impressed on him by being made to represent him, as he put to the ultimate test. Hiram's willingness to die to defend what he regarded as a sacred trust may not be a fate many of us will ever have to share, but the Ceremony reminds us that the high moral code to which we subscribe may lead us to having to make sacrifices in order to maintain our integrity.

One final point needs to be made. In the ritual drama of the Third-Degree, Hiram is killed and buried. The subsequent discovery of his body serves to reinforce the notion of the sacrifice Hiram made to defend the truth. While the Candidate is made to re-enact that death, his subsequent 'Raising' should not be thought of as a sort of resurrection and it is made clear that at some future time, and none of us knows when, our lives will end and so we are well advised to make the best use of the time we have upon this earth to ensure that we too may 'live respected and die regretted'.

##END##

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- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
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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

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