



## PAPER

### Darkness Visible

**Summary:** A reflection on the nature of the 'Light' contained in the pivotal section of the entire Craft ritual, the Charge in the Third Degree.

*'Yet from those flames no light, but rather darkness visible.'*

*Paradise Lost, John Milton (1608–1674)*



There are thirty or so lines within the Third Degree Charge that have been described variously as being the heart, the soul, the marrow, the essence, the core of Speculative Freemasonry. Certainly, the theme of 'Darkness Visible' has attracted the attention of many distinguished authors over the years who have found that a complete book has been necessary to express the thoughts inspired by those 30 lines.

Possibly the best-known Masonic book written about the theme of Darkness Visible is that of the Rev. Walton Hannah, focussing on the Masonic significance of the love of one's Creator and neighbour. In this note, let us reflect on the three sources of light referred to in our Charge: 'that Light which is from above'; 'this glimmering ray'; and 'that bright Morning Star', and try to disentangle their separate significance when contemplating the Light of a Master Mason.

**That Light which is from above:** When these words are spoken there are two feasible explanations of the Light's source, the candle by the Master's Chair, or the words of the Great Architect contained in the Volume of the Sacred Law. In that a candidate has already been informed of the three Great Lights in Freemasonry and the first of these is the Volume of the Sacred Law; repetition in this context is improbable and we perhaps need look no further.

The associated phrase about human reason also suggests that it is not a physical but a mental and spiritual light that is being discussed. One could never describe the Volume of the Sacred Law as a glimmering light. The phrase *'that Light which is from above'* is therefore perhaps best explained as the Light or guidance from the Great Architect above as revealed within the pages of the Volume of the Sacred Law, on which the Candidate has made his Obligation.

**This glimmering ray:** In this phrase, we are now moving to another source of light. The clue is to be found in the remainder of the sentence, *'you perceive that you stand on the very brink of the grave...'* As the candidate is being asked to view an object, the light must be a physical one and in the prevailing darkness, the candle by the Master's Chair is the only possible source. The word 'glimmering' as 'to shine faintly and intermittently' is important. The Great and constant Light of the Volume of the Sacred Law can never be so described, but that from a candle can.

As only a candle flame has this quality Grand Lodge does not officially approve of any alternative source (e.g. electricity or oil) to a candle by the Master's chair. UGLE set out the reasons shortly after its formation in 1813. A Special Grand Lodge was convened on 20th May 1816, to witness the amalgamated rituals proposed by the Lodge of Reconciliation. The members were asked specifically to consider the Master's Light and they confirmed the 1813 view. A great authority, William H. White, the Grand Secretary at the time, repeated this guidance in a letter<sup>1</sup> on 7th December 1839:

*'The decision was, that the Master's Light was never to be extinguished while the Lodge was open, nor was it by any means to be shaded or obscured, and that no Lanthorn [lantern] or other device was to be admitted as a substitute.'*

*'One of the reasons is, that one of the Lights represents the Master, who is always present while the Lodge is open... so his Light cannot be extinguished until the Lodge is closed.'*

The Grand Secretary continued,

*'Such extinguishing is not only improper but positively in violation of a most maturely considered and unequivocal direction of the Grand Lodge, and that the introduction of a Lanthorn, &c., is equally against the Order.'*

This ruling still holds true to this day.

That great Masonic historian Harry Carr comments that since the essence of the Third Degree Ceremony requires a minimum illumination by a 'glimmering ray' arrangements should be made so that if say electric bulbs have been installed throughout the Temple, when they are switched off for this particular Ceremony then that by the Master's Chair should be replaced by a lighted wax candle. The wishes of both Grand Lodge and the Emulation Ritual would then be fully satisfied; the advice from the local Health and Safety expert is unrecorded.

**Lift our eyes to that bright Morning Star:** The continued inclusion of this phrase resulted from an oversight by the 1816 Lodge of Reconciliation. One of its aims had been to make the rituals universal by removing all references to any specific religion. However, the 'Bright Morning Star' is unequivocally Christian in origin. In the final chapter of the New Testament Christ described himself (NRSV Revelation 22:16) as:

*'It is I, Jesus... I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star'* (in the King James Version it reads *'bright and morning star'*). The completion of the sentence in the Charge with *'whose rising brings peace and salvation to the faithful and obedient of the human race'*, then makes perfect sense. Salvation by an astronomically bright morning star, divorced from Christ, would be meaningless.

We are nonetheless left with a quandary. While it would make perfect sense to deliver the Charge as written in Emulation to a Christian, what words should we use when Raising, say, a Jew, Moslem, Sikh or Hindu. Fortunately, several Jewish Lodges have already had to resolve this problem. Dr Cartwright suggests that in such circumstances we might use:

*'Lift our eyes to Him whose Divine Word brings Peace and Salvation to the faithful...'*

W. Bro. Carr notes that such revised wording has three advantages. It provides a definite meaning to the passage; it is in full accord with Masonic teaching; and it respects the religious beliefs of all participants.

Seeking more contemporary guidance, Graham Redman in his admirable *Masonic Etiquette Today*, (p. 94) also favours adapting the wording of the Emulation ritual when and where this permits a Mason to make a comparable commitment, but expressed in a more personally comfortable language.

**Authors Note:** The aim of this paper never to discuss the Darkness Visible as a moral philosophy. Rather it was to assist the newer Mason by inviting him to reflect on the nature of the 'Light' contained in the pivotal section of the entire Craft ritual, the Charge in the Third Degree. Hopefully it may illuminate some of the misunderstandings often arising from those deep and demanding phrases.

## References

1. *The Freemason, The Organ of the Craft, a weekly record of progress in Freemasonry, Literature, Science, and Art*, Vol. XVIII, No. 837, Saturday March 21, 1885. <https://masonicperiodicals.org/static/media/periodicals/119-FVL-1885-03-21-001-SINGLE.pdf>



## 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.

For further papers and other learning materials visit *Solomon* at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

## Acknowledgement:

UGLE gratefully acknowledges Michael Lee as the author of this document and for his permission to publish it in this form.

## Disclaimer:

The views or interpretations contained in this document are those of the author. UGLE recognises there are many different interpretations of ritual, symbolism and history. It does not endorse the contents of this document or of any external websites linked to within the document.

## Copyright:

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from The United Grand Lodge of England in writing.