



PAPER

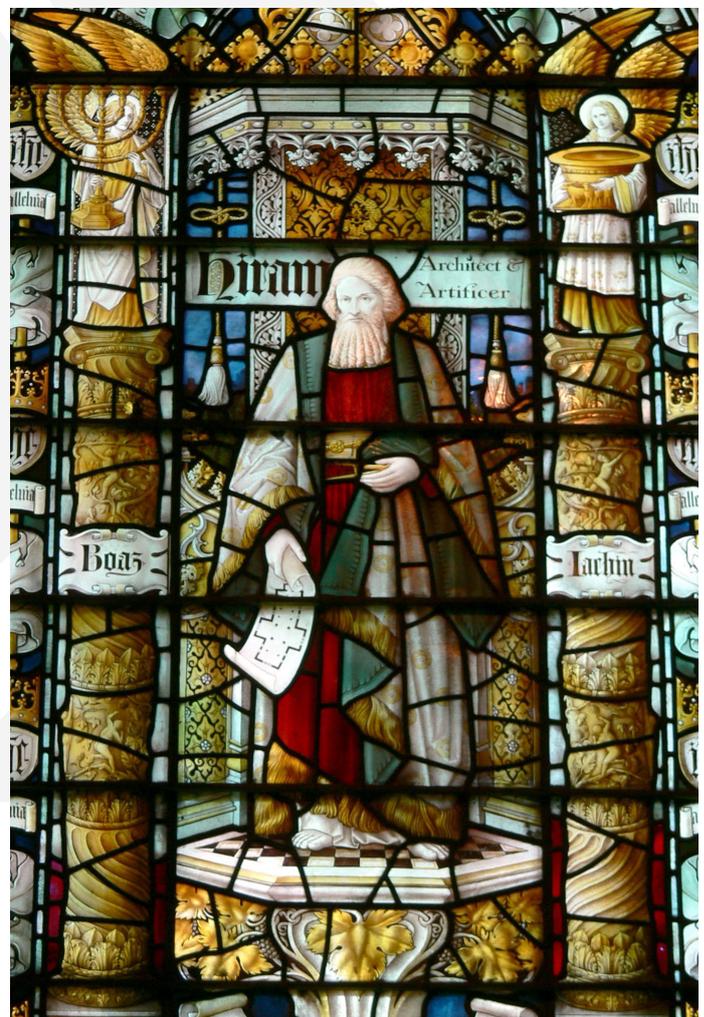
The Legend of Hiram Abiff

Summary: The legend of Hiram Abiff and its importance, by way of a parable, as a fundamental and moral lesson in Speculative Freemasonry; a message 'veiled in allegory'.

The legend of Hiram the widow's son is the foundation of Craft. Freemasonry's ritualistic drama of the Third Degree. Whilst it would be improper to reveal the ritualistic secrets, the story of Hiram is well known and has been referred to in many Masonic writings. In brief the Legend is as follows:

When King Solomon, King of Israel undertook to build the Temple at Jerusalem he sent to Hiram King of Tyre for men and materials in exchange for corn, wine and oil. King Hiram sent Solomon cedar trees cut from the forests of Lebanon and an expert metalworker. This story can be found in the Old Testament, in 1 Kings (Chapter 7) and 2 Chronicles (Chapter 2). Later reference is made to a skilled artisan named Hiram who 'was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre' (1 Kings 7:14).

This much of the Legend of Hiram comes from the Bible. However, the story from the Third Degree known to Freemasons has a tragically different development. Hiram who is called Abiff, a simple Hebrew name for father; in modern Jewish families he is called 'Aba'; a term of respect. We know that Hiram worked for King Solomon at Jerusalem and cast metal ornaments for the Temple and was possibly part of the 'Management Team', acting as the Master of the Works and Superintending Architect. More than 85,000 workmen were employed in the building of the Temple which took about seven years to complete. As part of an incentive scheme, workmen who laboured faithfully on the project may have been promised



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

promotion to 'Master Workman'; a privileged position with access to all the trade-secrets. However, having not being organised like a modern Trade Union, some may have been in the habit of employing more brutal, direct action, in keeping with the times. They therefore conspired to exhort the secrets and privileges of a Master Workman from Hiram Abiff, by the use of force if necessary. In spite of the violent threats of physical abuse, Hiram refused to yield to their demands. He no doubt would have reminded them that they had entered into obligations to serve King Solomon and to work in the service of God, and would eventually reap the just reward for their labours. Three of the more determined workmen, a ruthless and brutal group, conspired to attack Master Hiram, and if necessary, to beat the concessions out of him. Hiram Abiff was a character of outstanding principle and courage, so refused to concede to their unreasonable demands. Without hesitation, they slew him in the unfinished Temple. That essentially, is the Legend of Hiram Abiff.

It has become one of the most impressive ritualistic dramas, conveying the message of 'Good triumphing over Evil'. Hence, The Traditional History of the Third Degree is of cardinal importance. We as Freemasons will forever be indebted to whoever's imagination and skill transmitted it into the matchless drama, at the core of the 'sublime degree of a Master mason'. However, to the disappointment of many, the tragedy of Hiram is not to be found in the Bible. In fact, there is little reference to Hiram in the Old Testament, and the story of his assassination is not corroborated in either Kings or Chronicles. On the contrary, 2 Chronicles 4:11 states, '...And Hiram finished the work that he was to make for King Solomon for the house of God'. Yet it remains an important and fundamental lesson about Speculative Freemasonry, a moral lesson by way of a parable; a message 'veiled in allegory'.

How did this story originate? Down through the ages Masonic writers have chosen to provide a wide variety of possibilities, which makes for fascinating and thought-provoking reading. A gifted and inspiring Masonic historian, Dr Joseph Fort Newton, believed that the tragic story of Hiram was in the possession of Operative Masons from the Middle Ages; a view is in serious doubt, given that there is no mention of Hiram to be found in any of the Old Charges or Constitutions. Furthermore, modern Masonic scholars have shown that there was no system of gradual advancement through three ceremonies during this period of Operative Masonry; there was no such thing as The Third or Master Masons Degree as a rite or ceremony before the creation of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717.

Nevertheless, the Legend must have begun somewhere and it seems possible that we are looking at the re-working of some medieval play. Mystery Plays were the most popular form of public entertainment in the Middle Ages. Each craft guild or trade had its own preferred dramas, mostly of Biblical origin and were performed first in churches, then in public squares. They were called: 'mysteries', not because they were detective stories or contained any Craft secrets, but because they originated from the craft guilds or 'Mysteres', which is a variant of the French word 'Mestier' (a Craft or Guild). So, there you have it! The possible origin of the familiar expression to us all: 'The mysteries of Freemasonry' meant, 'the work of the craft or guild of Operative Masons'.



It is a mistake to consider The Hiram Legend as history, as it is purely allegorical. The symbolic dramatisation of Hiram Abiff is meant to remind us of the human soul. Hiram's work is symbolic of 'the allotted task' which we as Freemasons must perform 'whilst it is yet day' and his enemies may represent our own lusts, passions and failures of the spirit. This is the real importance of the 'Legend of Hiram', that it stirs men to serve the truth by steadfastly maintaining their noblest aspirations, even to their apparent defeat in death out of which can rise a more perfect tribute to our Masonic ideals.

Edwin Booth, the famous actor and loyal Mason, said:

'...in all my close analysis of the masterpieces of Shakespeare, in my earnest determination to make those plays appear real upon the mimic stage, I have never, and nowhere, met tragedy so real, so sublime, so magnificent as the legend of Hiram. It is substance without shadow - the manifest destiny of life which requires no picture and scarcely a word to make a lasting impression upon all who can understand.

To be a worshipful master, and to throw my whole soul in that work, with the candidate for my audience and the lodge for my stage, would be greater personal distinction than to receive the plaudits of people in the theatres of the world.'

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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