



PAPER

A Sprig of Acacia

Summary: What is the significance of Acacia to Freemasonry?

Acacia, important to Freemasonry as one of its most fundamental and beautiful symbols, signifies immortality. However, many Freemasons seem confused as how this symbolism came to be and exactly what its true place in religious history may be.

We cannot accurately denote a particular plant or tree as 'The Acacia Tree' for the same reason that we cannot accurately specify 'The Rose Bush' or 'The Pine Tree'. There are so many different varieties to distinguish one from the other. In fact, there are more than four hundred and fifty different varieties of acacia, so the word 'acacia' can only be applied in most general terms to all of them. It is therefore, not



Acacia catechu flowers. Credit: Btcpg [CC BY-SA]

surprising that we find one Masonic writer referring to 'The spreading leaves of the Acacia tree', and another talking about 'The low thorny shrub which is the Acacia'. Added to which, there is no absolute certainty that the trees that now grow in Palestine and Israel are the same as those which grew in Solomon's era. That said, it is not impossible that the Acacia Tortilis grew to a greater size three thousand years ago than it does now. However, there is doubt that the acacia which grows low, as a shrub or bush, and which in all probability, was the plant which was 'plucked from the ground' as a sprig of acacia is the only tree of any size, which grows in the deserts in this part of the Middle East. Hence, it is doubtful that it ever grew large enough to provide planks one and one-half cubits in width; the material from which the Arc of the Covenant was made.

What is interesting is the fact that the word Acacia does not appear anywhere in the Bible. Scholars are united in saying that the Shittah Tree, which is referred to in the Old Testament was almost certainly an acacia. In the bible we read:

'...and all the rivers of Juda will flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim' (Joel 3:18)

Commentators consider this place, now believed to be the Kidron referred to by the prophet of Ezekiel, is a dry thirsty valley, where the acacia flourished, whilst other plants perished through lack of water, was slow to grow. It is another reason for thinking that this is the original acacia; which we as Freemasons revere, was the smaller bush rather than the larger tree.

The Greek Word 'Akakia' actually means innocence; though it hardly seems sufficient to read 'innocence' into this symbol when it already has so sublime a significance. Research indicates that the beginning of the association of acacia with immortality dates back to the legend of Isis and Osiris, known to be one of the oldest myths of mankind, traced back into Egypt 6000 years ago. Its origin, like those of all legends, are shrouded in mist; drawing a veil between us and time Immemorial. It is considered by some Masonic historians to bear a striking similarity with the basis of the legend of Hiram Abiff. In brief, the legend tells the story of the powerful struggle of good versus evil. It depicts Osiris who was once King and God of Egypt whose body was eventually recovered after floating down the Nile encased within the trunk of an acacia tree (i.e. very indecently interred!). So, maybe it would be natural, that during their long captivity at the hands of the Egyptians, the Israelites to adopt the acacia as their own symbol of immortality?

It is perhaps too much to say that the Israelites were the first to plant a sprig of acacia at the head of a grave as a symbol of immortality. The reason that they did so, is that the Tribe of Cohen, who were the high priests, were forbidden to step upon, over, or close to a grave. Even today in the Jewish faith, a Cohen does not enter a holy place if there is a body inside. It was therefore, necessary that places of interment be marked; and the acacia, being commonplace, be selected for this purpose. Arguably then, a sprig of acacia, just might have been a practical symbol of mortality.

Perhaps in the final analysis, the origin of the custom is not so important. What is certain, is that people in all ages have planted or laid flowers on graves of those they love, as a symbol of remembrance and possible resurrection and a future life, i.e., the lily in a modern church, rosemary, and the red poppy of Flanders, for remembrance. The possible use of sprig of acacia of the ancient Israelites and its symbol for modern Freemasonry, all have the same meaning upon the grave; in common with many cultures. India gave to Egypt the lotus flower, long a sacred plant. The Greeks thought the myrtle, the tree of immortal life. The mistletoe, which survives as a pleasant diversion at Christmas, is in fact held by the Druids and the Scandinavians, as being sacred. In the Bible we will find a notation which couples the tree and immortal life:

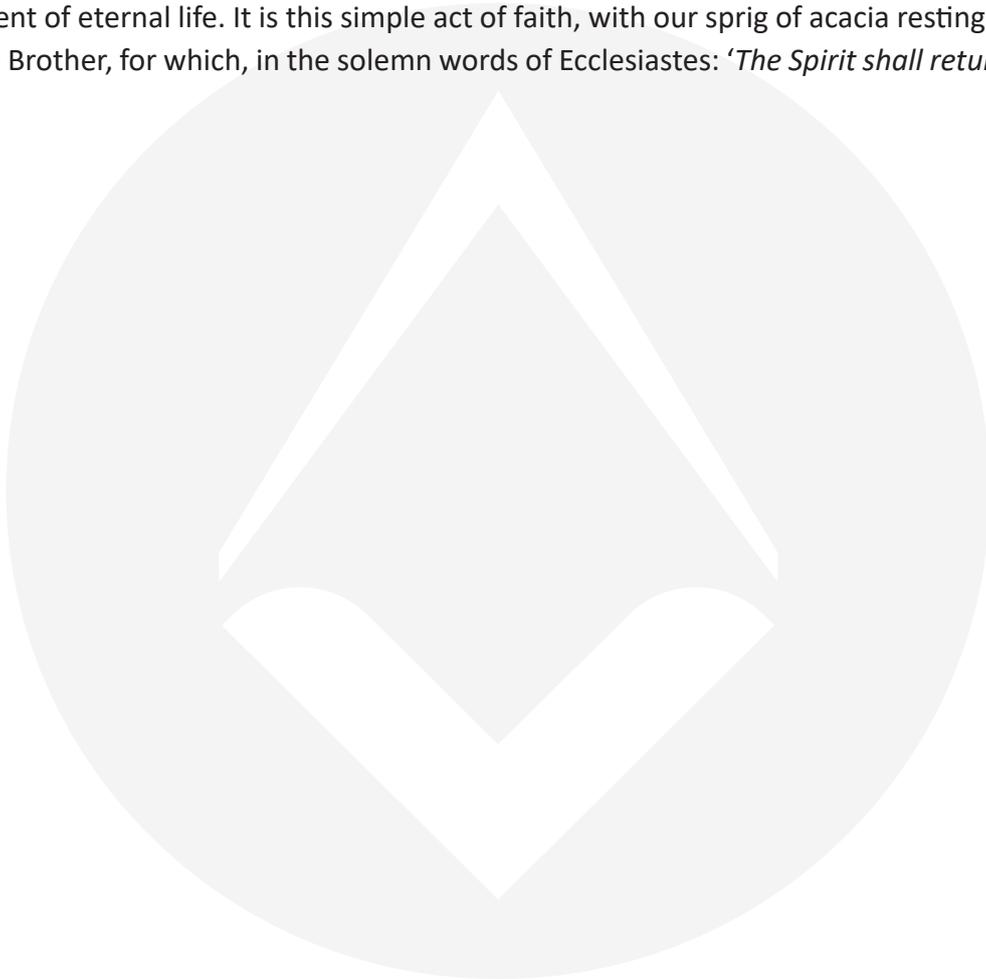
'For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.' (Job 14:7)

Hence, we are able to see the historical connection between that which grows and dies and grows again as the fundamental idea of immortality. The Symbol of 'The Sprig of Acacia' is perhaps one of the most underrated glories of the Craft Degrees in Freemasonry. If a fairly recently raised Master Mason is asked to name six Masonic Symbols it is likely that a Sprig of Acacia will not be on his list; perhaps because it exemplifies the whole meaning of the Third Degree: Life Everlasting!



So, the Sprig of Acacia, Freemasonry's gentle assurance that we do not go down to the ground and there remain, has come to symbolise not only immortality, but Faith; the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

In the Ceremony of burial of a Freemason (Part of the Masonic tradition still practised throughout the United States of America) Brethren toss a sprig of evergreen onto the coffin of the deceased, who has gone ahead upon the path that we all must tread. This gesture is evidence of our belief in things unseen, it is our acknowledgement of eternal life. It is this simple act of faith, with our sprig of acacia resting upon the casket of our departed Brother, for which, in the solemn words of Ecclesiastes: *'The Spirit shall return unto God who gave it'*.



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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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