



PAPER

Hiram Abiff According to Fred & Charlie



Summary: What does the Traditional History teach us?

It was an Easter like no other; Covid-19 reigned supreme. Fred sat in the sunshine on his patio silently watching his weeds thrive and grass shrivel. The gate eventually clicked and Charlie called in to see if the 'old chap' needed anything from town. Seated as by decree two-metres apart conversation turned inevitably to their Masonry.

Charlie had been puzzled (as many before him) about the Traditional History in the Third. He'd been re-reading the letter from Grand Lodge. It stated in a tone that could not be argued with that;

'...delivery of the Traditional History is an essential part of the Third Degree.'

and accordingly that;

'no one is to be registered in the Books of the Grand Lodge as having received the Third Degree unless and until the Traditional History has been communicated to him. Only then will he be entitled to a Grand Lodge Certificate...'

'Fred, surely this History, while a good romp, is entirely apocryphal? Why on earth impose a three-line whip?'

Fred's wife, assessing the scene with an accustomed eye, shimmied out with a tray of coffee and biscuits. Charlie rose, courtesies exchanged and re-seated, then resumed:

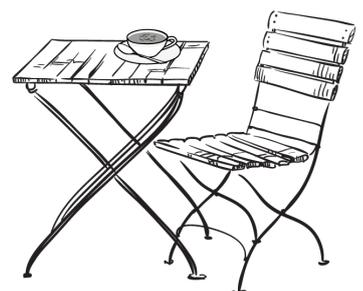
'So, what's so special about the Traditional History that no Raising is complete without it?'

Fred murmured:

'Well, it's all about the death of a master craftsman called Hiram Abiff?'

Charlie interrupted:

'Yes, but who was he?'





Fred's glance and raised eyebrow spoke volumes.

'As I said in my recent talk at Lodge of Instruction, to those who were listening, his first appears in the Old Testament when the Temple at Jerusalem was being built.

Solomon was charged by Jehovah to build him a Temple of his own design,¹ and he asked King Hiram of Tyre for workers and materials. Hiram replied:

'And now I have sent a skillful man, endowed with understanding, Hiram (Hiram Abiff) 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.'²

Fred added:

'Apart from the Bible the only known reference is a 1st century history by Flavius Josephus who refers to Hiram as an artificer in the Temple, never as a builder or architect'.³

Charlie had been listening attentively.

'Was Hiram perhaps important to the operative masons?'

Fred searched his memory.

'There's no reference to Hiram Abiff in any operative literature or catechisms for that matter. There is a wise-man called Hiram in some mediaeval German folk-lore, but that's as close as it gets.'

Charlie exploded.

'Then Why-O-Why is Grand Lodge forcing us to learn by heart a very long story about a chap building the Temple when the Volume of the Sacred Law says Solomon was the architect and the operatives don't even bother to mention him?'

Fred gave him an inscrutable 'Fred-type' smile, the Sphinx would have seemed a babbling brook in comparison. *'You're really asking two questions, Charlie. First, why did our knowledgeable Founders decide to introduce this shadowy figure of Hiram into their new Third Degree? Secondly why is Grand Lodge so insistent today that the Hiram Legend remains an essential part of a Freemason's education?'*

Charlie shrugged:

'Well?'

Fred settled back.

'Around 1740 Speculative Freemasonry in England suffered a mini-earthquake. The Modern Grand Lodge in London wished to maintain the old operative tradition of just the two Masonic levels, of apprentice and craftsman. However, some members weren't content. They wanted to add a third or Master Mason's Degree which was becoming popular in the Provinces'



'Why Fred?'

'Bluntly Charlie, the 'great and the good' of society felt they should have status higher than that of their servants.'

'Not very Brotherly', muttered Charlie.

'What finally swung it was pressure from the Scots exiled in Paris. They wanted Freemasonry to take a different direction entirely. In 1737 their Orator, Chevalier Andrew Ramsay, argued a case for introducing a nobler and more chivalrous dimension into Freemasonry. He had been inspired by the Crusading knights who, reputedly, had constructed their citadels in Jerusalem 'with trowel in one hand and sword in the other'. The Exiles wanted a Freemasonry based not on the operatives' charitable assistance but on higher knightly values of honour, chivalry and justice.'

'How on earth were they going to do that, Fred?'

'Ramsey proposed a Degree of the Knights Templar, reached by six rungs on the ladder including a third Craft Degree and the Royal Arch.'

'Sounds a bit too complicated to appeal to Grand Lodge', reflected Charlie.

'Yes, agreed, but Modern Grand Lodge actually gave in. They could now see an advantage. This was an age when a man's honour was priceless and gentlemen preferred it to life itself, even at the point of a pistol or duelling sword.'

'What was the advantage, Fred?'

'Grand Lodge could no longer preserve Masonic secrets by threatening their aristocrats with banishment from a building site; most would merely shout yippee! It was another matter though to question their honour should they reveal a Masonic secret. What better use for a new Degree than to proclaim death before the dishonour of breaking an oath or secret.'

'How did they set about writing this new Degree?'

'Grand Lodge didn't get to being where it is today without a certain economy of effort in these matters. They remained loyal to their two original Degrees, but astutely split all their material three ways thus creating a Third Degree'.

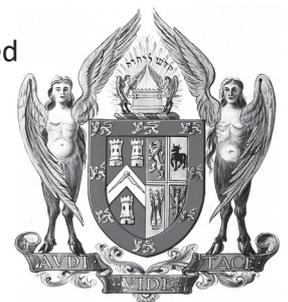
Charlie fascinated by it all, raised a hand. *'Is this why the Second Degree seems a little light, Fred?'*

Fred nodded and continued:

'They then had to introduce someone to embody honour. Hiram Abiff was certainly present during the building of Solomon's Temple. However, the socially conscious wouldn't want to identify with a metal smith, even one as highly regarded as Hiram, so he was promptly elevated to the Temple's builder. Weave all that into a suitably dramatic story and Bob's your Uncle and Honour becomes your soul mate.'

Charlie pondered over this while Fred's ever attentive wife, glancing at her watch, refilled the cups.

'So much for Hiram but you haven't explained why Grand Lodge considers the story's still essential today.'



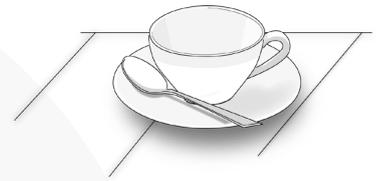


Fred took a long sip of his coffee:

'A Traditional History in the Third is still needed of course to explain the tokens and words but there is also a bigger social issue. In the confusing and very challenging moral climate swirling around us today Freemasons should perhaps be seen to set the standards by behaving honourably with each other, keeping their word and meeting their obligations to Society around them. For Grand Lodge the story of Hiram serves to remind us all that we should strive to maintain our high ideals, regardless of personal cost. A Freemason, like Hiram, always keeps his word.'

'Fred, I now understand. That seems a very good reason indeed to include the story in our rituals, even three centuries later!'

Hiram had given both Fred and Charlie much to think about.



Endnotes

1. 1 Kings:6–7
2. 2 Chronicles 2:13–14 NKJV
3. Flavius Josephus, (c. 94), Antiquities of the Jews: Ch.3, v.76

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).

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

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

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Fred and Charlie character drawings courtesy of Eddie Wildman.

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