



The Importance of a Traditional Understanding of Symbolism

By Andrew J. Korsberg

The source – the perennial center – of the Masonic tradition is not human, but divine. The modern view of the world limits a deeper understanding of Masonry by focusing only upon the historical timeline and the institutional developments of the fraternity. The non-human source of the Masonic tradition is a living presence in a tyled Lodge, communicated through allegories, symbols, and ritual words and movements. The outer form that exists in Freemasonry today contains the inner essence of a traditional spirituality. The outer form of Freemasonry is a tool to access the inner dimensions, the highest steps upon Jacob's ladder. The modern view, however, looks at Masonic symbols as historic relics, interesting only in how they came to be out of a specific time and place, completely missing the fact that these tools of Masonry are universal and perennial symbols, as living today as they were over a thousand years ago.

We do not live in the time when access to the divine has ceased, but rather in an age when there are few who are willing to sincerely embark upon the difficult path of spiritual realization. It should be no wonder why the quality of practicing Masonry has declined so severely when the institutional leaders in Masonry, in a fearful grasp to keep and gain membership numbers, reduce the qualifications of admission into the Craft, reduce proficiency requirements, and change the ritual. It is for this reason that the traditional observance movement is of primary importance, as it is countering these modern trends, and is attempting to aid in a recovery of the spirit, so to speak, of the inner truths of Freemasonry. Some will say that it is not about tradition but about quality, however this view misses the whole point.

Why should a Masonic Lodge even exist? A Masonic Lodge acts as a repository of primordial wisdom, a vehicle to transmit that wisdom through initiation, and a place of gathering with brothers upon the same or similar path, which is sometimes referred to as *satsanga* or company of the saints. It is very important in the spiritual journey to spend time with those who are likewise seeking higher things, as “for where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them.”¹ Two are greater together than one alone.

¹ Matthew 18:20 KJV

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A Masonic Lodge is not a social club, not a charity organization, not a place to impose one's individual will. The Lodge is a place to embrace the spirituality within the tradition of Masonry. Practice is done through contemplation of symbols, learning the lectures, and learning to cultivate what Aristotle called friendships of excellence. Any effort within any Lodge that distracts from the primary purpose of a Masonic Lodge is devious to the Craft and quite detrimental to the efforts toward spiritual growth.

The reason there is so much difficulty in practicing the Masonic ideal is the modern mentality, which while it has given us great advances on the physical plane, has diverted our attention from the deeper understandings. For example, symbols in a traditional society are understood as profound representations of deeper truths, ultimately the outer garment of the Creator, who has cloaked truth in the symbol. The modern man overlooks the most profound symbols. He fails to see the greater understanding in universal symbols like the circle, the tree, or the river. The modern man, overlooking these most profound symbols, recognizes instantly the commercial symbol of a McDonald's restaurant or an Apple computer yet fails to experience the profundity of the Sun in the sky. "Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house."² In fact, the modern view goes even farther as to deny any importance to symbols except to the viewer. "It's all in the eyes of the beholder," they say, but what they really mean is, "nothing has an intrinsic value, there are no universal truths, and the world has no meaning." The modern view purports that symbols only have value or meaning if one individual puts meaning into it, and the meaning of a symbol evolves over time and means different things to different people in different ages. However, while some may disagree, this modern view is actually nihilistic. A world without meaning is ultimately a meaningless world.

René Guénon states:

In reality, where something truly traditional is concerned, everything must on the contrary be present from the beginning, and subsequent developments serve only to render it more explicit without the adjunction of new and external elements."³... "To think that a new meaning can be given to a symbol that does not possess it intrinsically is almost to deny symbolism, for it makes of the latter something artificial if not entirely arbitrary, and in any case something purely human. In this order of ideas, [some go] so far as to say that everyone finds in a symbol what he himself puts into it, so that its meaning would change with the mentality of each epoch; here we recognize the 'psychological' theories so dear to many of our contemporaries. Were we not right, then, to speak of 'evolutionism'? We have said it often but cannot repeat it often enough: every true symbol bears its multiple meanings within itself, and this from its very origin, because it is not constituted as such as any human convention but in virtue of the 'law of correspondence' that links all worlds together; if some see these meanings while others do not, or see them only in part, they are no less truly contained in the symbol, for it is

² Ezekiel 12:2 KJV

³ Guénon, René. *Insights into Christian Esotericism*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p.74.

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the 'intellectual horizon' of each person that makes all the difference, symbolism being an exact science and not a reverie in which individual fantasies are given free rein.⁴

It is worth repeating again, "every true symbol bears its multiple meanings within itself."³ The symbolism in Masonry is not in the eye of the beholder, but is a vehicle for transmitting esoteric truths. The 'law of correspondence' that Guénon references is the connection of the divine into the world today. Masonry still exists, Jacob's ladder is still accessible, but few are attempting to climb towards heavenly understanding. Symbolism is "an exact science", not a psychological effect. Symbolism is a vehicle for spiritual understanding.

René Guénon also states:

...the essential function of symbolism... is to make the inexpressible 'accessible', to furnish the support that effectively permits intellectual intuition to reach it... The true foundation of symbolism is the correspondence that exists among all orders of reality, that links one to another, and that therefore extends from the natural order taken in its entirety to the supernatural order itself. By virtue of this correspondence all of nature is itself only a symbol, that is to say it receives its true meaning only if seen as a support to raise us to the knowledge of supernatural or 'metaphysical' (in the proper and etymological sense) truths, which is precisely the essential function of symbolism as well as the fundamental purpose of all traditional science. This is why the world is like a divine language to those who can understand it; according to the biblical expression, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God."⁵

It would behoove these arguments for traditional symbolism to give at least a few examples of the deeper understandings of Masonic symbols, in as much as this is possible and we are able. The square and compass, so widely recognized as the symbol of Masonry across the world, is a profound representation of Heaven and Earth. The compass is above the square and points to Heaven. It is a tool designed to construct a circle, starting with one point in the center and the other circumscribing the perfect circle. In this way the compass is symbolic of the divine. The point in the center represents heaven and the circumference represents emanations of the manifested world. It is worth noting the different positions the compass is placed depending on the degree level. In an Entered Apprentice Lodge both points are hidden, while in a Fellow Crafts Lodge one is hidden the other revealed. This shows that the Entered Apprentice still does not have a true understanding of the inner or the outer world, thus the need to subdue the passions first. The Fellow Craft, on the other hand, has begun to understand the manifested world, and thus one point is revealed, the point that drew the circle circumference. The Master Mason Lodge, on the other hand, reveals both points, demonstrating the situation of a true Master, who has understood both the internal and external, both the point in the center of the circle and the line of the circle's circumference.

⁴ Guénon, René. *Insights into Christian Esotericism*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p.75.

⁵ Guénon, René. *Perspectives on Initiation*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p. 126- 127.

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If the compass represents the spiritual world, Heaven, and connection to it, the square represents the manifested world and connection to material reality. There are four directions in the geometric square, while the circle only has dimension in relation to the distance from the center. Interestingly, the square is imbued with the circle, as one definition of the square is the fourth part of a circle. This connection to the circle is similar to the connection of the manifested reality to the supreme reality. The square is only part of the circle, just as manifestation is only an emanation, or reflection, of the Supreme Reality, often referred to as One without second. The world is a reflection of Divine wisdom and order, and to see the Divine in creation is to see the circle even in the square.

The square and compass together form an odd similarity to the star of David, which in the Hindu context is the same symbol for the heart center. The square points downward and the compass points upward, which is yet another reference to the ascending and descending of the Divine as symbolized in Jacob's ladder. The understandings of just these two symbols, the square and compass, are far deeper than we are capable of communicating, and in fact the most profound understanding is only achieved through intuition and cannot be communicated except through direct contemplation of the symbol.

In conclusion, symbols are not psychological, nor are they mere fantasies. Symbols within the Masonic tradition are tools to penetrate a deeper understanding of oneself as well as of the world. Masonic symbols are like a radio, broadcasting the music of the Creator, but we, the instruments to receive such wisdom, must tune in to the correct station. That is why a traditional understanding is so profoundly important, and how a modern view limits our ability to experience the Masonic ideal. Masonic symbols are living. Let us contemplate them together. Let us observe how "the heavens proclaim the glory of God."