

## Is There an Esoteric Masonry?

by Jay Kinney

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When Bro. Tom Jackson first invited me to speak before the Masonic Academy, he suggested that I might like to address the more esoteric side of Masonry. "Okay," I said. "How about if I discuss the question 'Is there an Esoteric Masonry?'" He thought that sounded good, so I sat down to write this speech and I rapidly realized that although this seemed like a fairly straight-forward question - "Is there an Esoteric Masonry?" - trying to answer that question satisfactorily is anything straight-forward.

Depending on how you define "esoteric," and even depending on how you define "Masonry," it is possible to come up with quite different answers. So it seemed to me that, right at the outset, I should establish a good working definition of "Esoteric Masonry." Then we could proceed to the question of whether it actually exists or not.

Now, in Masonry we often use the word "esoteric" to refer to those portions of our rituals that are not supposed to be revealed to non-Masons, such as our signs, tokens, grips, and passwords. Some Masons use the word to refer to parts of our rituals that aren't printed in our Monitors.

However, that's a fairly narrow and specialized use of the word, and most references to an Esoteric Masonry are not just referring to the secrecy of the rituals. When I ask "is there an esoteric Masonry?" I'm asking "is there a hidden or inner teaching within Masonry?" Esoteric, in this sense of "inner", is usually compared and contrasted with "oteric," which means "outer."

We're all familiar with oteric Masonry - it's the Grand Lodges and officers and stated meetings and appendant bodies, and even, in most respects, the degree rituals themselves, with their floorwork, their memorization, and their lectures. oteric Masonry is the outer form by which organized Freemasonry maintains and promulgates itself. If you are an active Mason, chances are that most of your time is taken up with oteric concerns.

However, a certain number of Masons have asked themselves whether there is something more to Masonry than memorizing lines or balancing the budget or showing up for stated meetings. "What about those so-called Secrets and Mysteries of Freemasonry that we promised not to reveal? Where are they? Surely we're not invoking all these drastic penalties on ourselves just for the sake of keeping a few signs and handshakes secret, are we?"

It is out of pondering questions such as these, that some Masons have become convinced that there must be an Masonry, a secret tradition concealed within our symbols and our rituals. Some sort of inner teachings that justify all the rest of the Masonic apparatus.

After all, if you just take at face value Masonry's stock explanations of its symbols' moral meanings, you end up with a bunch of admonitions to be truthful and trustworthy and on the level. This is an excellent moral code, to be sure, but these values are hardly unique to Masonry. You don't have to become a Mason to learn that you should tell the truth or pay your respects to God.

If we step back for a moment and just look at the Craft structurally, it certainly appears to have been set up to convey something special and worth keeping under wraps for hundreds of years. We have tylers guarding the lodge-room doors, oaths of secrecy, an emphasis on preserving ritual wording precisely, and warnings that innovations in Masonry are forbidden. All this implies that there is something very important about the way we do things - something significant that we are preserving.

Certainly when the Anti-Masons look at all this secrecy and effort, they assume that there must be fire behind all the smoke - and of course they are ready to put the worst possible interpretation on what that fire might be.

But there really some fire? Or to put it in Masonic terms - is there really some at the end of the rough and rugged road? Is there an inner Masonic teaching that is not apparent at first glance, but which may reveal itself, if we work at it hard enough? And if so, what might it be?

Now, this question has been of particular interest to me, as I'm one of those Masons who originally entered the Craft going on the assumption that Freemasonry was some kind of repository of esoteric spiritual traditions. I'd had an interest in such arcane matters for most of my life - even to the extent of publishing a magazine about them for 14 years. Clearly, I was already sold on the idea that there was an esoteric Masonry to be found. I wasn't sure what it , exactly, but I was eager to find out. So, I set out on my Masonic journey.

But a funny thing happened along the way. The more I delved into Masonic history and symbolism, the more the mysteries grew. One question mark led to another, which led to another. Masonry at times came to resemble those Russian nested dolls where you take the top off the first doll and discover another doll within and this goes on endlessly.

So, what I'd like to do today is share with you some of those mysteries, in the hope that together we might find a little "more light" in Freemasonry.

I'll admit up front that there is something inherently ridiculous about searching for an esoteric Masonry. If there such a thing, why would it be so hard to find? And why would so few Masons have seemingly found it? Isn't it kind of insulting to the vast majority of our brethren to imply that there's been some secret tradition - some inner teaching - right under our noses for centuries, but most of us have been unaware of it?

One obvious response to this question would be that there is an esoteric Masonry and any Mason can find it. According to this view, it is provided in the additional degrees of the York Rite and Scottish Rite. I don't really have a problem with that notion, except for one thing: all of the additional degrees were devised a good while after the three blue lodge degrees.

So, if those further degrees constitute an inner Masonry, this would seem to imply that there weren't real Secrets and Mysteries, or some kind of a hidden teaching within blue lodge Masonry to begin with – it had to be added later. It is quite possible that some of the Masons who devised the many additional degrees felt that way. And certainly, proponents of both the York and Scottish Rites have sometimes claimed that their systems offer what is lacking in the blue lodge degrees.

However, I'm going to leave the Scottish and York Rites out of our discussion today, as it is my premise that if there is an esoteric Masonry to be found within exoteric Masonry, it ought to be present in our craft lodges – because that is where the core of Masonry is.

Now, there's more than one way to go about seeking our elusive treasure. I've identified three common methods that seem to have been employed by those looking for inner Masonic doctrines or teachings.

One approach is to look at the degree rituals and symbols, and then see if there are any similarities between those and other spiritual and esoteric sources. For example, one might take the Hiram Abiff story and look for similar tales of a slain hero in various ancient myths. Or one might note that the Worshipful Master in the lodge is symbolic of the Sun rising in the East, and then see whether this parallels certain figures in solar religions.

This approach can lead to much interesting speculation, but it has one main danger. And that is that even if you find such parallels, it doesn't logically follow that Masonry is necessarily an inheritor of those myths and traditions. For instance, we could claim that the slain Grand Master Hiram Abiff is similar to the figure of the slain Egyptian god Osiris. Maybe so, but that doesn't mean that esoteric Masonry is therefore an extension or revival of the ancient Egyptian religion.

Unfortunately, certain imaginative Masons, as well as anti-Masonic or sensational authors, have employed such flawed logic, with typically incredulous results. Nevertheless, this method of finding parallels or earlier examples of Masonic elements can be useful if you restrain yourself from jumping to conclusions.

Another approach is to look at the history of our degree rituals and any accompanying symbols. I noticed, for instance, that two of the books on the Masonic Academy's suggested reading list were Harry Carr's book on the York Rite from the 1700s, and the Knoop, Jones, and Hamer book on the Scottish Rite from the same period and a little earlier. Both of those books are great resources for discovering what the earliest versions of the degree rituals and lectures may have been like.

Now why would this be important? Because, despite the popular impression that the wording of our rituals has been handed down unchanged from time immemorial, that is really not the case. The rituals of today are not identical to the rituals

of the early 1700s. If there an inner Masonry with a genuine historical pedigree, it would make sense to seek out the earliest ritual material that we can find and see if we can identify any elements that would seem to point to concealed esoteric teachings.

The third approach to seeking an esoteric Masonry is in some ways the toughest. This involves trying to get a handle on the out of which speculative Masonry grew. This means trying to understand the changing cultural, religious, and political landscape of the 1600s and 1700s in the British Isles and, to a certain extent, on the Continent. It means trying to understand the philosophical and spiritual interests that the first speculative Masons would have brought with them into the transitional lodges and gatherings in the 1600s, when the operative masons were beginning to be outnumbered by gentlemen and other non-operatives. And this means getting a grasp of the intellectual currents in the air of the late Renaissance and the early Enlightenment era - roughly the span of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

See what I mean about this being a tough approach? It's the equivalent of suggesting you go out and get a PhD in English History. What would we hope to find with this approach to our search?

Well, it is my hunch that any esoteric or hidden teachings that would have been injected into the rituals or catechisms of early speculative Masonry would have likely reflected the esoteric interests of the men who devised those rituals and catechisms. Now, that's assuming those men had some philosophical or metaphysical ideas that they felt needed to be concealed in the first place.

We know, for instance, that the first two men on record as having been initiated as Masons in England were Robert Moray and Elias Ashmole, both of whom were interested in the Rosicrucian philosophy that was then making waves across Europe, and interested as well in Alchemy and in Christian Cabala, which was a Christianized version of the Jewish mystical system that spread across Europe during the Renaissance.

Now, as Francis Yeats and other scholars have shown, these esoteric pursuits were pervasive in the learned circles of that era - where they constituted the cutting edge of what we now think of as Science. But it was a science, or search for nature's laws, that was intertwined with a rather mystical outlook. In trying to uncover the hidden laws of nature, they were also hoping to draw closer to a knowledge of God and the Cosmos.

Needless to say, this pursuit of knowledge was a very risky affair - especially when it ran afoul of Church authorities or Royal disapproval. So, one of the theories regarding a possible esoteric Masonry is that men with such interests may have been attracted to the safe, confidential environment of Masonic lodges and, over time, helped evolve rituals and symbols related to their esoteric interests.

Now it would be nice and tidy if we could point to someone like Elias Ashmole as being the author of the degree rituals, but we can't. First of all, we don't really know who authored the rituals and, second, we can't be positive about their exact content at any given moment. The rituals seem to have evolved over a considerable period of time, from a simple two-degree

format partially derived from operative masonry to the more complex three-degree format with which we are familiar. So the rituals likely had multiple authors, not always of the same era or necessarily in philosophical agreement.

And this is where things begin to get a bit shaky in our search for an esoteric Masonry by using this historical approach.

If we admit this likely circumstance - that there were multiple ritual authors over a considerable span of time - then we are presented with a challenge to the whole notion of a coherent esoteric Masonry contained within the symbols and rituals of the blue lodge.

Just how likely is it that multiple ritual authors spanning several decades, one adding element and another adding element, were able to coordinate and conceal a consistent hidden teaching that then, after all that work, got lost or perhaps buried beneath yet further added elements?

I don't know about you, but this struck me as quite a stretch, and reflecting upon it I was inclined to question my whole assumption that there was an esoteric Masonry to be found.

And yet. . . I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on in our rituals and symbols than first meets the eye. When performed well, the three degrees can have an impact that is seemingly greater than the mere sum of their parts. They really work as initiatory dramas that are capable of starting the candidate on a new path in life - if he so chooses.

So, let's put aside the issue of who wrote the rituals and when, and worrying about their esoteric intentions. Instead, let's just consider what is actually going on in the rituals. I'll make this very brief, as I'm sure that most of us hardly need to be reminded of every little detail.

Basically, what we have as the degrees progress is the candidate cast in the role of a stonemason, who is a worker helping to build King Solomon's Temple, reputedly the most glorious Temple to the Most High ever built.

The degree establishes the idea that speculative Masonry uses metaphors and allegory to get its message across. It also introduces the idea that the candidate is expected to work on himself.

The degree helps drive home the idea that, metaphorically speaking, the lodge-room represents King Solomon's Temple itself. The candidate is told that hard work will be rewarded, both with wages and with access to the Middle Chamber. He is encouraged to advance his knowledge through a broad-based study of the liberal arts, with particular emphasis on Geometry.

Finally, in the degree, the candidate symbolically becomes the Grand Master of the masons working on the Temple. He now has access to the Inner Chamber, the Sanctum Sanctorum, where he is said to pray each day. But in attempting to leave the Temple he is set upon by three of his workers who have been unable to keep their passions within due bounds. The Master is slain and once the assassins are found and given their just desserts, the Master's body is discovered and raised from its temporary grave. The candidate is now himself again, but alas, the Master's Word cannot now be given, so he receives a substitute instead.

So, what do we have here? We have a progression going on, from degree to degree, which takes the new Mason from the condition of rank beginner to that of Grand Master. It also takes

him from knocking at the door of the Temple, on into the Temple, up the winding staircase to the Outer Chamber and then to the door of the Middle Chamber. And finally, as Hiram Abiff, he has access to the Sanctum Sanctorum. So this is a progression towards ever more intimate closeness to God's presence in the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies.

It seems like we are being told, metaphorically, that if we polish our ashlar and rise to a level of mastership, we may earn the right or ability to commune with the Great Architect of the Universe. But that communion is not without danger. One's passions, if they aren't restrained, may rise up in jealousy and threaten one's life, and if extreme enough, may even take it.

Of course it is possible that I am reading too much into the meaning of the degree rituals, but it certainly seems like we are being given a model, through allegory, for what could be called spiritual growth or self enfoldment. It is almost reminiscent in some ways of John Bunyan's extended allegory, , which by the way was first published in 1678, right in the middle of the era when speculative Masonry was beginning to take shape.

Thinking back over the degrees, it suddenly occurred to me that there is this one brief passage - just a single sentence, really - in the first degree, which sums up the model I have just been describing. We've all heard it numerous times, but it is worth repeating. In California, it is printed in the Grand Lodge's Monitor. It is also there in Thomas Smith Webb's from 1797, in nearly identical language.

I'm referring to the explanation of the Common Gavel. The sentence goes: "But we, as Free and Accepted Masons, are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of divesting our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life; thereby fitting our minds as living stones for that spiritual building, that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Now, I've always thought of that as one of the most poetic passages in our ritual, but it didn't occur to me until recently that perhaps it was a window into the esoteric Masonry I had been seeking.

Parts of the sentence are, of course, phrases also found in the Bible, in the New Testament. However, they are put to a slightly different use in our ritual. There are three key passages here: first, "divesting our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life." In the Webb Monitor this reads slightly differently, as it speaks of "divesting our and consciences." At first this would appear to be an admonition to live a moral life, and undoubtedly it that in part. But it also reads like a prescription for a common meditation technique: sit quietly and clear your mind (or heart) of all superfluities. Purify your consciousness, in other words.

By doing that we are fitting ourselves as "living stones." Again, there's some variation from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In California we are "fitting our minds as living stones," in Pennsylvania I believe your ritual has "fitting as living stones," while Webb has "fitting our as living stones." But whatever the version, our task is to make ourselves fit, as "living stones," for that spiritual building or temple, "that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Now, the common understanding of the phrase, "that house not made with hands," is that it refers to our home in the

afterlife in Heaven. So, a conventional interpretation of all this would be that we are being urged to live a moral life so that we will be fit to go to Heaven when we die. Fair enough. I won't argue with that.

But an esoteric reading of that same passage might see it as urging us to clear our minds or consciousness in order to enter into or be part of an eternal spiritual temple. It struck me that in the California ritual we are "fitting our as living stones for that spiritual building," which sounds to me like a present-tense activity. Perhaps that spiritual temple isn't just in the hereafter, but is a metaphor for an interior sacred space that is fit to serve as a dwelling place for the Most High, within ourselves in the Here and Now.

So to sum things up, perhaps our rituals are suggesting, by allegory, that we are both the builders of a great temple the stones with which it is built. If we polish our ashlar well enough, become the temple. Within the temple there is a sanctum sanctorum, a holy of holies, wherein dwelleth the Lord. We must purify ourselves in order to approach that space, but it is within the reach of each of us, just as every Fellow-craft can become a Master if he works diligently at it.

So maybe there an esoteric Masonry right under our noses, one that lives in the myth of Hiram and the Temple. It isn't dependent on the precise wording of the ritual - which as we've seen can differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. And it doesn't require that those who are enacting the ritual even be aware of it. And strangest of all, it may not even require that any Mason think of it as "esoteric."

Simply through the repetition of undergoing the rituals, and then witnessing them again and again, or better yet, helping to perform them, we are internalizing the model of the Temple and the Holy of Holies. If we take the advice seriously to divest ourselves of superfluities and polish our ashlar, to seek guidance in prayer and in scripture, we are a good ways along the road, whether we consider ourselves to be esoteric Masons or not.

Of course, all this is easier said than done. My own ashlar remains pretty rough, and it often feels like I have yet to make it into the Middle Chamber, much less the Holy of Holies. Building a Temple is hard work, and working on yourself is harder still.

Did our Masonic ancestors realize all this when they developed the ritual work? That's probably impossible to answer. It seems like the Temple motif was a truly inspired flash of genius, but a lot of the other material - including many of the symbols and lengthy lectures - amount to baggage that has accumulated along the way. To pour over most of it in search of a coherent esoteric system may be a wild goose chase.

So, in the end, were I to answer my own question - "Is there an esoteric Masonry? - I would have to say that, yes, there is. It may not be what I originally expected it to be. It may be both simpler and harder than many Masons seeking it have thought. It may just consist of actually doing the work that Masonry admonishes us to do, right there in the ritual. Imagine that!