

SYMBOLATRY
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The Webster Dictionary defines Symbolatry as the worship or excessive veneration of symbols. This strange word came to prominence with the advent of the books written by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels and Demons*, and *The Lost Symbol*. The leading character in each of these novels was Robert Langdon. Robert Langdon was a college professor teaching symbolatry.

Symbols may be defined as, an outward sign of something else. Albert Gallatin Mackey, in his book, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, defined symbolism as follows, "A symbol is the expression of an idea that has been derived from the comparison or contrast of some object with a moral conception or attribute".

Symbols are everywhere in our society. Bro. L. M. Sherwood P.M., of New South Wales, author of an article in *Ars Quatuor Coronati*, defines symbols as a tangible object that stands for or represents something else with the purpose of giving a clearer understanding of the importance of what is being symbolized.

We could not communicate without the use of symbols. Think of the fact that words are symbols that convey the meaning of a thought. Mackey also wrote, "Words are only and truly certain arbitrary symbols by which and through we give an utterance to our ideas".

The letter "S" with one or two perpendicular lines through it conveys value. We see symbols everywhere. In Masonry, we talk about being "Free" and "Accepted". The word "Free" is a symbol conveying the idea that the operative masons were free to travel. "Accepted" conveys the idea that individuals who were not operative masons, yet wished to join a lodge, were accepted into the lodge even though they may not meet the qualifications.

It is surprising to realize that the oldest symbol in existence is the swastika. The swastika is over 4,000 years old. It was used to represent the sun god. It was used in Sanskrit. It was found in pre-historic cave and wall drawings in the Americas, Europe, and India, Of course, we are familiar with the fact of the swastika being used as the symbol of Nazi Germany. Not all of these swastikas are the same. The arms of the crooked cross may point in different directions.

How, then, are symbols used in Freemasonry? Freemasonry has been defined as, "a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols". Albert Gallatin Mackey, the eminent Masonic historian and author, defined Freemasonry as, "a system of morality developed and inculcated by the science of symbolism".

In the book, *Sources of Masonic Symbolism*, by Alex Home, the author states that there are three methods of interpreting symbols.

The first method is called, "personal symbolism". Each individual interprets symbols in his own personal way. The individuals personal biases and experiences determine how a symbol is interpreted. W. H. Rylands (*Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* (AQC) Vol. III, pp7-24 *On The Antiquity of Masonic Symbolism*) wrote, "On very few questions has more rubbish been written than that of symbolism and symbols. It is a happy hunting ground for those guided by not sort of system or rule, guided by not sort of system or rule, ruled only by their sweet will,

love to allow their fancies and imagination to run wild.” H. L. Haywood stated, “Some writers appear to harbor the belief that a Mason is free to hold to any theory of a symbol which may chance to appeal to himself”. Of course, any Mason is free to hold his own opinions. However, in stating his opinions, he should make it known that these are his personal beliefs.

The second method of interpretation of symbols is Masonic Symbolism. This is the interpretation of symbols as set forth in such books as *The Book of Standard Work* published by the Grand Lodge of Illinois. This is the definition of symbols as set forth in the books setting forth the Masonic rituals and catechisms.

Finally, there is a form of interpretation called Comparative Symbolism. There are many cultures that have used symbols throughout the centuries. These are cultures such as the early Egyptians, the Rosicrucians, , the Kabalists, the Gnostics, etc. Symbols have received various and divers interpretations across the culture spectrum. An example of this is the previously mentioned swastika. Care must be taken to believe that an earlier interpretation of a symbol must necessarily mean that a similar interpretation should be assigned to a Masonic symbol. Even though then earlier interpretation may is similar to our own.

In an article entitled *Symbolatry* by Bro. L. M. Sherwood (AQC Vol. 85 p317) the author lists seven types of symbols. They are as follows:

1. Indicative Symbol, sometimes called an arbitrary or conventional symbol. In this category the symbol does not resemble or signify a conventional relation. Examples are, a national flag that represents a unity of people, shaking hands signifies friendship, letters of the alphabet signify sounds, raising your hat signifies respect.
2. Emblem, sometimes called an intrinsic or natural symbol. For example a crown signifies royalty, whiteness connotes purity, a dove suggests peace. A symbol may have two meanings or more than one significance.
3. Badge, distinguishes association. For example, a star can mean a police officer, a Masonic apron denotes membership in the craft, as does a square and compasses.
4. Sign, a mark or action by which a thing or condition may be recognized. Examples are, a blush which implies shame or some other emotion, a sign which denotes the penalty of the obligation
5. Token, a voluntary expression of an attitude, understanding, or intent. Examples are, a kiss which shows love, a Masonic grip which indicates membership in Freemasonry, a deposit of money which implies a decision to purchase.
6. 6. Device, a symbolic figure representing to the mind an idea. An example is a trademark, a drawing or painting which represents something other than what is depicted.
7. Parable or allegory, spoken or written symbols that tell a fictional story as if it is true and depicts a moral principal that is left to the hearer or reader to discover. An example is the legend of Hiram Abiff which symbolizes death and resurrection.

When we begin our studies of the symbolism of Freemasonry, what, then, should be the initial focus of our inquiries. Mackey is further quoted as, “In attempting any investigation into the symbolism of

Freemasonry, the first thing to engage our attention is the general purpose of our institution and the mode in which its symbolism developed”.

The foregoing thought brings us to the premises of Horne listed above. In the study of the history of our brotherhood, there is a separation between the study of the history of our lodge system and its development in the lodges of the operative masons that preceded them. When studying the history of our ritual, we have to start with the thoughts of those that wrote the ritual from its inception through the changes that have occurred throughout the years.

Horne’s first premise is that interpretation of a Masonic symbol is guided by the personal ideas of the author of the symbolic interpretation. This is what Horne calls personal symbolism. Next is Horne’s idea of comparative symbolism. That is, a comparison of the symbolic meaning of today compared with the symbolic genesis from such philosophies as the hidden mysteries, ancient Egypt or the Hebrews, the Kabbalah, the Rosicrucians, etc.

The history of the symbolism attaching to our Masonic ritual brings some interesting thoughts regarding how our ritual evolved. The early story of Freemasonry must be split into the past story of our lodge system and the genesis of the rituals that teach the Masonic principals inherent in Freemasonry.

There is little doubt that our lodge system came from the lodges of operative freemasonry that began in the gothic period of architecture in medieval England. However, the beginnings of our ritual symbolism may have begun significantly earlier in world history.

An important article entitled. *On The Antiquity of Masonic Symbolism*, by Bro. R. F. Gould. This article appeared in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* Vol. 3, 1890, at pp. 7- 31. In this article, the author quotes several items of symbolism that precede the symbolism in our Masonic ritual.

These quotations start with the Chinese *Book of History*, which embraces a period of time from the twenty fourth to the seventh centuries prior to the birth of Christ. In this book we may find examples of some of the symbolism attaching to the rituals of Freemasonry, One of the quotations is from the Chinese philosopher, Confucius. Mencius, a follower of Confucius is quoted as saying, in the year, 481 B.C.E., “it was taught that men should apply the square and compasses figuratively to their lives and the level and the marking line besides. Mencius is further quoted as writing, “A Master Mason in teaching his apprentices makes use of the compasses and the square in the pursuit of wisdom.”

Thus, it is easy to understand that the beginnings of our Masonic ritual started with the symbolism attached to the tools of the operative masonic trade and their application to leading of a well run life style. These symbols were in use many centuries prior to the gothic period of the operative masonic lodges.

There is much evidence that the symbolism of our masonic tools came from the symbolism utilized in early Egyptian and Hebrew cultures. Our fraternity is ancient, indeed. There is much to be learned from the symbols attached to our ritual. However, what these symbols portray, may be left to mind set of each of our brethren.

How, then, should the symbolism of our current ritual be interpreted? There are approximately ninety symbolic items in the ritual of the three degrees as set forth in the Book of Standard Work authorized by

our Grand Lodge in Illinois. Much of the symbolism is defined in the lectures that are given after the new brother is obligated. These definitions are mandated by the Board of Grand Examiners. However, the symbolism of the items in the degree work may also be expanded and self-defined. This self-definition can go a long way toward making the brother a Mason in more than name only,

There is much to be learned from the symbolism of the degrees. The new brother should be encouraged to read and understand the lectures of all three degrees. However, a study of the philosophy of our fraternity should also be studied so that the Masonic student can gain much more from the symbolism of the degrees.