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School of Philosophy
22° – Knight of the Royal Axe or Prince of Libanus
Topic 1

“To Work and Act As Such”

*“The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.”
Psalm 92:12*

Freemasonry is stocked with symbols that seem immaterial in one degree and profound in another. Such is the case when we discuss the cedars of Lebanon. In Masonic ritual, we are first introduced to these trees during the lecture of the 3°. Here, we are informed that King Solomon ordered workers to obtain and employ cedar wood from Lebanon in the building of the Temple. The Bible seems to confirm this bit of Masonic ritual as fact. Further, the Bible tells us Lebanon’s cedar trees were not only utilized in the building of King Solomon’s temple but also in the construction of the second Temple by Zerubbabel. But why cedar, and what was so special about the cedar trees of Lebanon? The answer probably lies somewhere in the world of facts, but the realm of truth and symbolism is also required in order to understand the profound nature of Lebanon’s famous cedar trees.

In general, trees are amazing symbols for humans to emulate. Trees symbolize such things as wisdom and protection, the former because of their age and the latter due to the shelter trees provide from the elements as well as the sun’s heat. In addition, trees can obviously symbolize strength and growth due to their obvious physical characteristics. As trees age, they obviously grow. As they grow, they become stronger; their roots become deeper; their branches spread and widen. Characteristics such as these undoubtedly led humans to track their ancestry via a “family” tree. Trees also remind us of nature’s cycle of

time, a cycle of birth, maturity, age, and death. Plus, trees are outstanding symbols of immortality. Although the leaves fall in the autumn and the tree is barren during the winter, the leaves return each spring with the season's annual renewal of life. Year after year, trees continually display this cycle and remind us of a solemn yet fundamental lesson in faith: in death, there is also rebirth.

Further, trees teach us about the concept of duality. In literature, forests can act as a refuge for the innocent and a place of safety or as a harbor for criminals and a source of danger. Through the cycles of nature, trees teach us about life as well as death. In the Bible, the Tree of Life becomes the tree of death after Adam and Eve's "original sin." In this manner, the symbolism of trees is analogous to that of the yin and the yang, the Star of David, and the mosaic pavement.

Mythology is overrun with images referring to trees. Symbolically, the tree links the three "levels" of the universe: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Many myths relate the idea that trees act as a means of transportation to and from each of these "worlds," making the tree one of the most common symbols attached to initiation. In Vedic myth, wood is the fundamental material of the entire universe. To the Celtic Druids, different trees represented astronomical events. In the book *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves argues that the Druids used trees to keep track of their calendar year. Each tree is associated with different gods, temperaments, and spiritual characteristics.

Cedar trees themselves take on their own symbolism and meaning. The cedar tree is associated with qualities such as cleansing, healing, and protection. Cedar wood is wonderfully fragrant and has beautiful grains. The wood is also strong and straight. Hence,

cedar is used when crafting fine objects and furnishings. In particular, cedar wood is used to construct beams, pillars, and ship masts because of its length, strength, and straightness.

The cedar trees of Lebanon are even more impressive, both physically and symbolically. Lebanon literally means “the white one,” which probably refers to the snow covered peaks of the Lebanon Mountains. Of course, symbolically the color white represents purity and is prominently represented in Masonry by the Mason’s white apron. It is said that the tall cedars of Lebanon were used in the construction of such relics as Noah’s Ark and the Ark of the Covenant as well as the Temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel. Each structure is consistent with the concept of purity: God purified the earth with the flood, saving Noah as well as the other inhabitants of the ark; God required the Jewish nation to purify itself and solidified his pact with His people through the Ark of the Covenant; both Temples were places of worship – places to purify one’s soul. In the same vein, it is said that the cross Christ was crucified upon was also made of cedar trees from Lebanon. Again, we see a vivid example of the cedar portrayed as a symbol of purity and immortality. Another interesting fact about these cedar trees is that they could grow up to 100 feet in height and they produced purple cones. Purple is a symbol of royalty, due in part to its rarity in the early world and therefore its high price tag. Consisting of the colors red and blue, purple combines the elements of sacrifice, courage, and authority.

In the 22° of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the candidate is received into a college of artificers based in a forest of Lebanon to learn and grow in Masonic knowledge. Here, craftsman must utilize the axe, plane, and saw as working tools. The axe fells the tree while the saw and plane carve the tree into pillars and boards for constructive purposes. Like workers in stone who turn the rough ashlar into a perfect ashlar, these artificers turn

raw wood into beautiful building materials. With time, patience, fervency, and zeal, the tree, like the stone, is honed into perfection.

It is here in the work of the college that we find the true meaning of this degree's allegory. The cedar trees surely represent mankind. As humans, we are born, we grow, we learn, we mature, we age, and eventually, after our own growth and reproductive stages, the ruthless hand of time terminates our life. During our lifetime, we are to follow the example of Lebanon's cedar trees: stand tall, be strong, produce good fruit, and continue to grow. However, death is neither the end of the tree's usefulness nor our own existence. As we are taught in nature, in death there is rebirth. The immortal soul lives on in the same manner that the felled tree lives again and is cherished by being utilized in our homes and places of worship.

If we are true Masons, we will be immortalized in many ways. Our deeds will live on in the memories of our benefactors. Our works will foster the development of future generations. Our soul will transcend our earthly existence and we will be welcomed to the Grand Lodge on High. The tall cedars of Lebanon remind us to be pure, productive, and righteous citizens of the world who are willing to stand tall in the face of ignorance, superstition, and fanaticism. As Knights of the Royal Axe, we are reminded of those words said to us in the Entered Apprentice Degree, "My Brother, you there stand a just and upright Mason, and I give it you strictly in charge to ever work and act as such." Such are the lessons of the 22° - to *work* and to *act* as a Mason, a Knight, and a Prince to humankind.

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