

Some Ritual Origins

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The ritual is, as has often been observed, fundamental to Freemasonry, and it gives form to our proceedings. We like to think of it as one of the landmarks, but it does change, though only slowly. Let me remind you of how far back in Masonry we can trace certain words and episodes.

We begin with the familiar phrase So mote it be, which sometimes baffles new Masons. That is because it is extremely old, and includes an obsolete form of the verb. Actually these very words are found in the earliest extant copy of the Old Charges of the operative masons, the Regius Poem, which was written in England about the year 1390. Almost as old, it turns out, is Masonic emphasis on the seven liberal sciences, and on the building of King Solomon's Temple; both are essential parts of the Cooke Manuscript, which goes back to about 1410. Indeed they continued to be a regular part of the standard versions of the Old Charges that served to govern the Craft for the next three hundred years.

There is a marvellous collection of early ritual documents covering the years 1696-1730, called The Early Masonic Catechisms. In this work we find that the phrases "hele and conceal" and "Five points of fellowship" both occur in the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696. "The square, the compass, and the Bible" are mentioned together in the Dumfries Manuscript No. 4, of about 1710. A London newspaper of 1723 published what purported to be an exposure of the Masonic ceremonies, and there we find the five orders of architecture duly listed. The well-known trio "Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth," comes from another exposure, a pamphlet printed in London in 1724.

Anderson's Book of Constitutions of 1723 mentions the toast to "The King and the Craft." It also refers to God as the Great Architect of the Universe (a phrase first used by John Calvin), and

alludes in passing to Hiram Abif (a name which comes from 2 Chronicles 4:16, in Coverdale's Bible of 1535).

The most popular of the early exposures was Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected*, first published in 1730. And there we find such familiar phrases as "Neither naked nor cloathed, bare-foot nor shod," "Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty," "Square, Level, and Plumb-Rule," and "a Sprig of Cassia at the Head of his Grave."

The earliest version of the Charge to the Newly Initiated Candidate, the one with the words "Antient, as having subsisted from Times immemorial," that outlines our duty "to God, our Neighbours, and Ourselves," appears in William Smith's *Pocket Companion* (Dublin, 1735).

The story of Ephraimites at the passage of the River Jordan turns up in a French exposure of 1747. Whether it had been borrowed from English sources is not clear; at any rate, it soon appears in printed English rituals.

The next great landmark in the evolution of our ceremonies is the advent of the three great expounders of the ritual, who were the first ones to provide more substantial lectures. Wellins Calcott lived from 1726 until after 1779; in his book *A Candid Disquisition* (1769), he speaks of Pythagoras and the Egyptian philosophers, who concealed their principles under the cover of hieroglyphics. He also offers some familiar words of advice:

"Right Worshipful Sir, BY the unanimous voice of the members of this lodge, you are elected to the mastership thereof for the ensuing half-year...You have been of too long standing, and are too good a member of our community, to require now any information in the duty of your office. What you have seen praiseworthy in others, we doubt not you will imitate; and what you have seen defective, you will in yourself amend...For a pattern of imitation, consider the great luminary of nature, which, rising in the east, regularly diffuses light and lustre to all within its circle. In like manner it is your province, with due decorum, to spread and communicate light and instruction to the brethren in the lodge."

To be sure, the sentiments expressed here have now been assigned to two different charges. But their original source is unmistakable.

William Hutchinson (1732-1814), in his *Spirit of Masonry* (1775), offers a series of Moral Observations on the Instruments of Masonry. They interpret the significance of the working tools.

"The Level should advise us that...we are all descended from the same common stock, partake of the like nature, have... the same hope...; and though distinctions necessarily make a subordination among mankind, yet eminence of station should not make us forget that we are men, nor cause us to treat our brethren, because placed on the lowest spoke of the wheel of fortune, with contempt; because a time will come, and the wisest of men know not how soon, when all distinctions,

except in goodness, will cease, and when death – that grand leveller of all human greatness – will bring us to a level at the last."

Once again, beyond any question our present wording is derived from this text.

And the great William Preston (1742-1818), in his *Illustrations of Masonry* (2nd edition, 1775), offers a familiar prayer:

"Vouchsafe thine aid, Almighty Father and supreme Governor of the world, to this our present convention; and grant that this candidate for Masonry may dedicate and devote his life to thy service, and become a true and faithful brother among us. Endue him with a competence of thy divine wisdom, that, by the secrets of this Art, he may be better enabled to unfold the mysteries of godliness, to the honour of thy holy name. Amen."

Virtually all of our present wording, we now see, is derived from Britain. But, as we have noted on previous occasions, there is one major piece of ritual that was "made in Canada" – the General Charge at the Ceremony of Installation. The late M.W. Bro. William Kirk Bailey (1904-1992) succeeded in tracing the various sources from which Otto Klotz was able to put it together in 1876. One part, for example, comes from the Grand Master's address delivered by M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson at the Annual Communication in Ottawa in 1860:

"It comforts the mourner; it speaks peace and consolation to the troubled spirit; it carries relief and gladness to the habitations of want and destitution; it dries the tears of the widow and orphan; it opens the source of knowledge; it widens the sphere of human happiness; it even seeks to light up the darkness and gloom of the grave, by pointing to the hopes and promises of a better life to come. All this Masonry has done and is still doing. Such is Masonry and such its mission; and we should never forget, while enjoying its benefits and appreciating its value, the duties we owe to the Order; for there is no right without a parallel duty, no liberty without the supremacy of the law, no high destiny without earnest perseverance, and no real greatness without self denial."

The General Charge is the latest major addition to our work. Since that date various smaller adjustments have been made under due authority. Let us just look at one. Up until 1964, the traditional wording for the penalties of the obligations in much of the English-speaking world had been, "Under no less a penalty..." But in 1964, the United Grand Lodge of England gave its lodges the option of either retaining the traditional wording, or else saying, "Ever bearing in mind the traditional penalty..." Three years later, in 1967, our Grand Lodge prescribed that this newer wording was to be used by all lodges. Wisely, it permitted no deviation, and by this means it avoided certain problems that subsequently developed in England.

Even on the basis of the evidence presented here, we can see that the Masonic ritual is part of our precious heritage from the past. It has stood the test of time, no doubt because it expresses eternal verities. It is still meaningful to the brethren of today!

STB - October 1996