

PART II

Now if the Gothic stonemasons were in fact familiar with architectural symbolism, as appears to be the case, on good authority, where did they get it from? (That is the trouble with questions; one question frequently and almost inevitably leads to another). In attempting to answer this more significant question, we come to consider the well-known fact that, in the early days before the Reformation, the dominant power in all of Western Europe was the Roman Catholic Church, and our Operative Mason ancestors were all Roman Catholics. As such, the Church became the financier, directly or indirectly, of the numerous religious edifices of all kinds that came to be erected, and thus became the employers and perhaps the inspirers of the stonemasons who did the actual work. And it is said that many ecclesiastics of the different Orders had actually taken an active and personal interest in the design of these sacred edifices, learning and applying the art of architecture, and that of the stonemason, to that purpose. (Perhaps not to such a great extent as is sometimes stated: popular ideas sometimes do get exaggerated, but it is the exaggeration that should be discounted, not necessarily the ideas themselves). Those of you who may have visited England may have seen the Cathedral of Winchester, and may have noticed in it the effigy of William Bishop of Wykeham, who is reputed to have designed the Cathedral, and may have superintended its construction, and is now seen lying on his tomb on the floor of his church.

These ecclesiastics who took an interest in architecture --among the Monastic Orders, the Benedictines are frequently cited in this connection -- these ecclesiastics can be assumed to have wanted to express their own religious ideas and hopes in architectural details, in harmony with the ideas of "architectural symbolism" previously mentioned; in the stained-glass windows, the wall paintings, and the sculptural figures that abound in all these Gothic structures, as well as the very shape and arrangement of the architectural details as a whole. This, in fact, is the specific intent of Brother Martin Nickelsen's article in the September 1976, Oregon Freemason on the "Influence of the Mediaeval Church on Freemasonry". In this article, resulting from a wide reading on the subject, he suggests "the probability that at least some of the forms and symbols of the Mediaeval Church were adopted by the operative crafts and later adapted to the evolving structure of Speculative Freemasonry". This is what we mean by Religious and Architectural Symbolism.

And thus we find the antiquarian T.D. Fosbroke, who writes on British Monachism (that is, the practice and the ideas of British monks). (He is not definitely known to have been a Freemason, but he is listed in the British Museum Catalogue as having delivered a sermon to the Royal Berkeley Lodge in 1819 on "The character and origin of freemasonry", thus expressing his field of interest and perhaps, his expertise.) In this work on British Monachism he cites "the use of tessellated pavements (what we call Mosaic Pavements, which means the same thing) ... confined (he says) to consecrated places almost without exception" -- and thus giving this practice some special significance -- just as we sometimes treat our own Mosaic Pavements in our Lodge Rooms, previously mentioned. Those of you who saw on TV the recent Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee Celebration in St. Paul's Cathedral, may remember

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seeing our chequered Mosaic Pavement at the Eastern end of the Nave, and thus in a "consecrated place" as in Fosbroke's description. This particular feature in St. Paul's Cathedral may not have impressed you at the time, if you did not

understand its special significance, but it was not there just for decorative purposes, empty of symbolic intent and meaning.

Now, going back to our Gothic Architecture and its principal features, we thus see the Church Spire, pointing its symbolical finger dramatically towards the Heavens, as if to remind us daily of our Creator, and of the Heavenly Abode which we should all aspire to inhabit some day, when our time comes. And thus we see the Church and Cathedral always oriented on an East-West axis, with the Sanctuary and High Altar always in the East, the Source of all Light, physical and spiritual -- an idea perhaps inherited from our primitive Solar Worship, when the Sun in the sky was worshipped as a god, the Divine Source of all Life, vegetable, animal; and human -- a practice we still symbolize in the traditional arrangement of the Masonic Lodge, with the Master's place, and the Letter G above him, always in the symbolical East. Thus, we today also carry out the practice in our Masonic Lodges, at the Opening Ceremony, of inviting "all Masters and Past Masters to a seat in the East," the place of honor. Thus, also, we come to understand -- if we didn't understand it before -- the significance of the song that the character Tevya sings in "The Fiddler on the Roof"-- "If I were a rich man" -- when he expresses his highest ambition that he could then -- if he were a rich man --be able to "sit all day in the Synagogue by the Eastern wall" -- the place of honor, where the Sacred Scrolls of the Law are kept. It is an almost universal symbol -- this veneration for the East -- a natural symbol understood by many peoples from early times, and accepted because it is natural, and free from fanciful exaggeration. And so we sometimes refer to the Master's Chair, and the Grand Master's Chair, as the so-called "Oriental" Chair, even when it is made by Chippendale, a natural symbol which we often take for granted, without question; as we should.

Thus we also see the laying of Foundation and Corner-stones generally in the North-East Corner, accompanied with a ceremony of Dedication or Consecration which the Catholic Church practices even today, just as we do, and with similar or analogous details and interpretations, which points dramatically to where many of our symbols come from, via the Operative Masons who absorbed them, from the Church, and carried them forward into Speculative times..

This we also see most graphically in the Pointed Arch -- that ever-present and characteristic feature of all religious Gothic edifices -- differing from the semi-circular arch of the Romans --and which some think was meant to represent two up-raised arms with fingers touching as if in prayer (try this in front of a mirror) -- a most suggestive symbol of the very purpose and dedication of these sacred Gothic edifices. I happened to make reference to this architectural symbolism in a Talk I gave in my own Lodge at one time, with its possible interpretation, and a Past Master who happened to visit Venice a couple of years later, and saw St. Mark's Cathedral, described his visit enthusiastically in a subsequent Lodge Talk, greeting me from the platform with this unspoken symbol of the upraised arms, as if to indicate to me that he remembered, And I venture to predict that you too will always remember this characteristic symbol of the Pointed Arch and its possible significance, whenever you have occasion in future to see a Gothic edifice, in living stone, or in a painting or photograph. It is a symbol not easy to forget.

In the Middle Ages, they also had, in addition to Architectural Symbolism, an institution generally referred to as the Bestiary, that is, the study about beasts, the religious study of animal symbolism. Thus we find the Dove, a symbol of the Holy Ghost; the Phoenix, a symbol of the Resurrection and Immortality; the Eagle, a symbol of Freedom of Thought; the Pelican, a symbol of Brotherly Love -- both of the latter of special interest in the Scottish Rite.

And, of course, the Lion, reminding us of "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah", and of the Strong Grip of the Lion's Paw; and the Lamb --Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God -- and hence our white Lambskin Apron, "emblem of innocence, and the Badge of a Mason,"

There was also the analogous institution of Christian Iconography -- the study of geometrical patterns, mystic symbols, and illustrative materials generally, which we find in the design and

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embellishment of religious edifices, in the stained-glass windows and wall paintings previously mentioned, with their Biblical illustrations and lessons -- the Poor Man's Bible, they used to call it, especially when the Bible was only in Latin, and could only be learned from a priest or a Monk conversant with that language. At this time -- and this applied to many stonemasons as well as to others -- those who could not read were still able to absorb some of these Biblical lessons directly by pictographic means.. And thus we see such symbols as the Equilateral Triangle (of especial interest to Scottish Rite Masons) as a universal symbol of the Trinity, though it has other and non-sectarian meanings as well; and the double-interlaced triangle, seen in the Scottish Rite and the Royal Arch of the York Rite; sometimes seen in religious illustrations as a divine halo, or nimbus, as in a fresco at Mt. Athos, a center of Byzantine monastic art from very ancient times. We most often also see the Circle, as a symbol of Infinite Perfection, and used as a halo adorning divine or saintly beings; while the rectangle and square, as a symbol of purely human perfection, would be used as a halo for adorning lesser mortals.

When some parts of the Bible finally came to be translated into English, about the middle of the 14th century, those who could read were now able to come in direct contact with the ideas found in the Bible, by their own efforts. Here even numerical symbolism is found to have been used, as well as the symbolism of colours, to express religious and ethical ideas, just as we do today, to express Masonic thoughts of a similar character. In the Book of Isaiah, for example (28:16), we find God saying: "Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation." and in the Book of Amos (7:7,8), we find the statement: "And behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand.... Then said the Lord (whom we now refer to as the Great Architect of the Universe), Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel" -- a symbolism that we, as Freemasons, have no difficulty in understanding.

The building of King Solomon's Temple, as profusely described in the Old Testament (1Kings 5 and 2 Chron. 2), came to furnish us with an enormous amount of symbolism, especially with regard to the Two Pillars in the Porch, named in the Bible Jachin and Boaz. This gave John Bunyon -- better known for his work, The Pilgrim's Progress ---an opportunity to write on the subject of Solomon's Temple Spiritualized; just as the Puritan Divine, Samuel Lee, also did, and with an almost similar sub-title, and with precisely similar intent, in his 1659 work, Orbis Miraculum, or The Temple of Solomon, portrayed by Scripture Light. When a new set of Masonic documents -- The Early Masonic Catechisms -- began to appear, toward the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, we find some of this previous symbolism in Bunyon and Lee coming into Masonic thought, in Lodge work; especially The Dumfries No. 4 MS. of about 1710, found in Scotland, and which the Editors of this collection of Catechisms --Knoop, Jones, and Hamer -- think must have been used for ritual purposes, as it showed signs of considerable handling.

Lee devotes considerable attention to many of the architectural features

of the Temple, but especially the Two Pillars in the Porch, now found represented in our Lodge Rooms. Lee finds "the Tops of the Pillars" to be "Curiously adorned," as he puts it. The Lily-Work, he says, was the Emblem of Innocence; the Pomegranates, because of there being so many grains in each piece, was the Emblem of Fruitfulness, or Fertility, and so forth. He calls God the "Grand Architect," and thinks it not unusual that "men should be compared to stones in a Building." while "Principal Men" -- by which he no doubt means the leaders of the people -- are usually compared to Foundations and Pillars of support. And this may later have suggested our own Three Pillars which are said to metaphorically support our Lodge, and which are said to symbolize Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, these in turn being traditionally represented by three certainly "Principal Men" at the building of the Temple at Jerusalem -- namely, Solomon, King of Israel; Hiram, King of Tyre; and Hiram Abiff.

But the New Testament is also found to be profuse in symbolism, with its ideal City built Four-square, to denote Perfection, and "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Rev. 21:16; Heb. 11:10). And the idea of man being a spiritual Temple for the Divine Spirit, as in the teachings of St. Paul.

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These, and similar teachings, are all ideas that would have a special significance to stonemasons, especially those who worked on the religious edifices, and they could not help but be influenced by them, once they came in contact with them, either through indirect teaching by the Church, or by reading the Bible for themselves, when they had become able to do so, and the English Bible had finally become available.

But ideas of this nature had been going abroad for some time in various circles. We find Bishop Durandus, writing his Rationale of the Divine Offices as early as about 1286, doing much symbolizing that we can understand even now, with his moralizing on the elements of religious architecture and of stonemasonry. He speaks, for example of stones that are "polished and squared, that is, holy and pure," just as we now speak of the Perfect Ashlar. And (I quote again) "as without cement the stones cannot (Cohere)," he says, "so neither can men be built up in the heavenly Jerusalem without charity" -- a remarkable statement reminding us of our own moralizing on the Trowel as a Working Tool, teaching us to spread the cement of Brotherly Love. A still more remarkable statement by Bishop Durandus is his reference to the Apostolic Constitutions, giving the official rules, of church building. "The church," he says; "must be oblong in form, and pointing to the East," reminding us precisely of our own description of "the form of the Lodge".