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THE THREE GREAT LIGHTS IN MASONRY

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"On beingCompasses". Again the second and third degrees, "The same. . - your view." While they vary in position they never vary in value or the order of their Masonic importance. This would seem to be the sum and substance of the entire matter, but a study of them reveals a great deal more. Masonry, as a vast storehouse of knowledge and information accumulated over a period of centuries, consists of wise and serious truths, axioms or facts that need no further demonstration, incontrovertible statements that are accepted without contradiction; in fact, there are so many things in Masonry that we thus accept that we frequently lose sight of their value and importance. The candidate accepts our explanation of the Three Great Lights without ever questioning our reasons for thus acknowledging them. There must have been some good reason why the Fraternity selected them, so let us consider the matter for a few moments and draw some reasonable conclusions.

"The Bible.... faith." By the very honor which Masonry pays the Bible we are taught to revere every Book of Faith in which man has found help for today, hope for tomorrow, and lasting proof of eternal life. Whether it be in the books of Confucius; the Sacred writings of the Buddha; the Veda of the Brahman; the Koran of the Mohammedan; the five books of Moses comprising the Pentateuch of the Old Testament (the Jewish Dispensation); or, the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament (the Christian Faith). These are beyond question the most sacred writings for each one according to his faith. Although we honor every book of Faith in which man has found comfort and command, yet for us here, the Bible is supreme - at once the Mother-book of our literature and the Masterbook of the Lodge. The Bible opens when the Lodge opens; it closes when the Lodge closes. Without its divine guidance, no business is legal, no initiation valid, and no obligation binding. Thus, the Book of Faith rules the Craft in its labors as the sun rules the day, making its work a worship and the Lodge, a Temple.

Because the Holy Bible is accepted by us as the Most Sacred of all writing, you were requested to take your oaths upon it, for we believe that no one could be so inexpressibly base as to assume solemn and binding obligations upon its Sacred pages, seal the same with the simple act of affection, and then apathetically and utterly disregard them.

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To preserve, defend and obey the Bible is the first duty of every Mason from the Most Worshipful Grand Master in the Grand East to the humblest Entered Apprentice that ever stood in the northeast corner of a Lodge. However men may differ in their religious opinions, they all agree that in this Book are to be found those principles of truth, and laws of morality upon which to build an upright character and a stable social order. Its presence in the Lodge is proof against all pettiness, all low aims, impure motives or unworthy ideals, as well as a proof and prophecy of the moral manhood we seek to attain. In depth, in wonder, in beauty, in richness of moral truths, there is no other Book like it - no, none even near it.! Its pages are Holy, its laws binding, and its spirit is the breath of God. A Book, which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power At

once the most majestic thing in all literature, and by all odds the most spiritual thing we inherit. In its spiritual significance, it is the most valuable thing on earth.

At one point which marks the ceremony of the coronation of England's King, the Archbishop of Canterbury approaches his Majesty with a copy of the Bible, and says: "Our most gracious Sovereign, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the Royal Law; these are the Oracles of the Living God. It is therefore only just and proper that we should further examine this Book, so let us approach it from another viewpoint.

While it is not a book of law, it records the Ten Commandments originally written by the finger of God on tablets of stone and handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai, which Commandments constitute the greatest ethical code of moral laws ever given humanity to abide by.

While it is not a book on political science and economy, its basic policies for the government of man have never been excelled - or even equaled.

While it is not a medical treatise on sanitary engineering, the rules of health laid down by it are still of the greatest value.

While it is not a book on construction or architecture, it explains in detail the building of one of the world's most famous structures, "The Temple of Solomon".

While it is not a book of oratory, some of the finest addresses and most effective speeches ever made have been based on material taken from it.

While it is not a book of poetry, some of the most beautiful lines ever penned are to be found in the Songs of Solomon and the Psalms of David.

While it is not a book of love stories, one of the most profound stories of utter love and devotion is recorded in it. It is the story of a woman who sacrificed the worship of her gods, the traditions of her people, her friends, her family, her entire race, to lay all upon the altar of love. It was Ruth who said:
"Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God".

While it is not primarily a book of heroes and their brave deeds, its greatest episode is one of the supreme sacrifices; "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends".

While it is not a book of war and conquest, it relates the struggles of the Israelites among their enemies and above all, it acquaints us with the unique story of a general who commanded the sun to stand still until his victory had been achieved.

While it is not a book on military strategy, it records the most ingenious feat of strategy ever employed in the history of warfare. (The Shibboleth story and the substitution of the letter 'Sarneke'

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for that of 'Shim'). By the simple expediency of a password, Jephthah made his victory secure and then ventured with complete confidence on the inability of the Ephriamites to properly pronounce the first letter of that password.

How many of the forty and two thousand that fell on that day thus met their fate, we are not told; but in a military sense, even in this remote and modern day of warfare, a password is still used as a means of identification.

While the first part of this book as we see it here on the altar is devoted almost exclusively to one particular group of people, it is not prejudiced, and it is not propaganda, for it tells of their trials and errors, their mistakes and misfortunes, as well as their attainments, achievements, and accomplishments. It relates the life stories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Little did the daughter of Pharaoh of Egypt realize what vast, far-reaching consequences her moment of compassion would have on the history of her country, when she heard the little Hebrew boy crying in that little ark moored among the bulrushes on the banks of the river Nile! For when she saw him she took pity on him and sent one of her maids to find a Hebrew nurse for him, which by a most peculiar chain of circumstances turned out to be the mother of Moses.

In spite of the royal decree of her father, the Pharaoh, who had ordered all male Hebrew children destroyed at birth, she begged him and he relented. Thus, under Royal supervision, Moses was reared at court, taught the best education available to the priests of those remote days, daily coming in contact with court life, court intrigue, court decisions and royal decrees. In fact, Moses was a most powerful political figure in his time, for he made the throne of Pharaoh tremble with fear before he left Egypt with his people.

The Book further tells the story of the Israelites, of their years of bondage under their Egyptian task-masters, then of their wonderful deliverance, that magnificent passage of the Red Sea rendered possible by that miraculous East Wind. It tells of their trials and tribulations of forty years in the wilderness, following a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night across that treacherous desert of southern Arabia, where all of them would have starved had it not been for the miracle of the manna. It also tells of their triumphant entrance into the Promised Land which Moses was permitted to see from the top of Mount Nebo before he died. It further tells of their rise as a great nation among the nations of the world under Joshua, David and Solomon. And I venture to say that the Israelite nation reached its zenith during the reign of its greatest Sovereign, Solomon, both in culture and civilization. It later tells of their decline and destruction by the armed forces of Nebuchadnezzar under the able command of his general, Nebuzarradan, who laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, and when - after one and a half years - the famine became so great as to force them to capitulate, they were carried captive to Babylon with all the Holy Vessels of the Holy House, Jerusalem was laid waste, and the Temple destroyed. Here they remained until Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian monarchy, in the first year of his reign, set them free and gave them permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple even with financial assistance from his own treasury.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah both prophesied the total destruction of the Temple, and Jesus recalled this as recorded in the 24 th chapter of Matthew. When, upon leaving the Temple, his disciples came to show him the buildings of the Temple, He turned, and pointing to it said: "See ye not all these things? Verily, I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down". So, in the year A.D. 70, when Titus, the pagan Roman general who had no knowledge of that prophecy, marched on Jerusalem to subdue a Jewish uprising and vent his malicious hatred upon them, he completed the destruction of the City and the Temple. History tells us that he so completely destroyed it

as to leave "not one stone upon another". All this is recorded accurately and yet quite unimpassionedly.

While it is a book of both history and prophecy it is also a sure guide to the Truth, and a lasting proof of a hereafter, for it speaks freely "of a glorious resurrection and a blessed immortality". And while

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it is not a book that pleases everyone, it is a book in which many have found lasting peace and consolation, and for which many have died. It is truly the inestimable gift of God to humanity, and the Fraternity therefore selected it as the First Great Light in Masonry, and dedicated it to Almighty God.

"The Square is of his office." When we speak of a Square man we think of an honest man. To explain the evolution of the square from a tool of the operative mason to a symbol of honesty, integrity, right dealing and good character, it is necessary to define it in terms of what it accomplishes as well as what it is. A square is an instrument by which operative masons can ascertain if two surfaces are at right angles to each other. It is also an instrument used in the hewing of stone to determine when the perfect ashlar has wholly emerged from the rough ashlar. Hewing stone is wholly a process of taking away, never one of adding to. It takes patient and painstaking work with gavel and chisel to remove and chip off the outer layers and imperfections so as to reveal the perfect ashlar within, but once the work is done, it is finished. More taken away from perfection merely produces imperfection. A square stone remains a square stone, and no movement will alter its squareness. It may be tumbled about, swung in mid-air, poised on edge, or set in a wall, yet it will lose no part of its squareness. By the same token, the Master Mason of good character may be tumbled about in the world, dangled in the space of misfit, be precariously balanced economically, or he an integer in solid society, but he retains his good character even as the square retains its squareness.

The importance of the perfect right angle in the square by which stones are shaped can hardly be overestimated. Cathedral builders erected their temples for all time. How well they built, a hundred glorious structures in the old world today mutely testify. They built well because they knew the secret of the square. Today most any school boy knows the simple secret of the square, but during the centuries in which the Cathedrals were built this was the closely guarded wisdom of the Masters alone

The operative Master's great secret was knowing how to try the square. It was by this means that they tested the working tools of the Fellows of the Craft, for by doing so often enough it was impossible for either their tools or their work to materially err.

Pass not this lesson lightly, my Brethren, but regard it with the reverence it deserves, for surely it is one of the great teachings of Masonry concealed within a symbol which is plain for any man to read if he has Masonry in his heart.

"Tools, and instruments of architecture, and symbolic emblems most expressive are selected by the Fraternity to imprint upon the mind wise and serious truths, and thus through a succession of ages are transmitted unimpaired the most excellent tenets of our Institution."

Thus the Fraternity selected the symbol of the great secret of the Master Builders as the Second Great Light in Masonry and dedicated it to the Master to whom it rightly belongs.

"And the compasses Mason." As you have noticed, the square and compasses are nearly always linked together and that is true as far back as we can go. In the sixth book of philosophy of Mencius in ancient China we find these words: "A master mason in teaching apprentices makes use of the compasses and the square. Ye who are engaged in the pursuit of wisdom must also use the compasses and square." Note the order of the words, the compasses have first place as they should have to a Master Mason. Remember, my Brethren, when you wereyou found the square resting wholly upon the Compasses.

Now we shall take the compasses apart from the square and discover what they teach. I dare say there is no more practical lesson in Masonry and it behooves us all to learn it well and lay it to heart. You will recall this phrase from the charge of the First Degree; "There are three great duties which you as a Mason are charged to inculcate, to God, your neighbor and yourself'. As the Holy Bible reveals our duties to God, and the Square instructs us in our duties to our neighbors, so the Compasses teach us the

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obligations we owe to ourselves. What these obligations are should not have to be made any plainer to any Master Mason, for it is the imperative, everyday duty to circumscribe his desires and keep his passions within due bounds towards all men. Our excellent King Solomon said centuries ago: "better is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city".

To know ourselves, our strength, our weaknesses, our desires, and our limitations, is the first principle of wisdom. Lacking such knowledge a man goes too far, loses control of himself and by that very fact in some measure loses his self-respect which is the cornerstone of his character. If he loses respect for himself he loses respect for others and goes down the road to destruction like a star out of orbit.

How to properly use the Compasses is one of the finest of the Arts, demanding the highest skill of a Master Mason. Since this instrument instructs us all to strive to attain and achieve that truly Masonic Circumspection, the Fraternity has selected it as the Third Great Light in Masonry and dedicated it to the Craft.

The Master Mason who is properly instructed and who carefully follows the practical application of the Compasses will rest one point on the innermost center of his being and with the other describe a circle about himself beyond which he will never permit his pride, his prejudices, his passions, or his desires to betray him. Within this circle he will live and labor and grow, and when by virtue of his spiritual growth he reaches the outer rim of that circle he will be eminently competent to draw another and larger circle and thereby attain a new and more beautiful concept of life.

Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed the thought in verse much better than I can ever hope to express it in prose, and so in closing, I quote to you from his

"Chambered Nautilus" -

"Build thee more stately mansions, O, my soul,
As the 'swift seasons roll.
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new Temple nobler than the last
Shut thee from Heaven with a dome more vast
Till though at length art free,

Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea."

(With grateful appreciation to Illustrious Brothers, Carl H. Claudy, 33°, P.G.M., D.C., and Joseph Fort Newton, 33°, one of Masonry's greatest scholars, from whose works I have generously borrowed.)