

A Symbolic Journey Through the Fellowcraft Degree

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Worshipful Master, Brethren, prior to proceeding from the 1st to the 2nd degrees in our initial progression through the rites of Freemasonry, we are all asked the question “What is Freemasonry?”. The answer we all gave was:

A beautiful and peculiar system of Morality,
veiled in Allegory,
and illustrated by Symbols

Dictionary.com defines Allegory as a “Symbolical narrative” and Webster’s dictionary defines it as a “Symbolic representation” which potentially leaves us scratching our heads a little – our Craft is both hidden from us and revealed to us by Symbols.

Symbols are not just pictures or images, but they can take the form of words, entire stories, numbers, actions, geometric attributes or even patterns formed by other objects which may or may not be symbols in their own rights.

The scope we are presented to work with in our Craft, Symbolically, is virtually unlimited – every word spoken and every movement or action made in Lodge has the potential to be a symbol or a part of a symbol, and to have meaning.

The Fellowcraft Degree

For all the 5 years or so I have been a Mason the Fellowcraft Degree has left me feeling that I understand it’s message and purpose less than either of the other two principal degrees. The EA and MM degrees perhaps do a better job of grabbing our attention and giving us a starting point in unraveling their meaning by being at the start and end points of the symbolic journey, but the FC degree is very much in the middle of a journey we don’t yet fully understand.

Inevitably, much of the Symbolism we find in the degree is biblical in nature, but that really shouldn’t surprise us given that the central metaphor of the Craft is taken from the Old Testament. I have also chosen not to focus on sets or patterns of symbols that obviously span all three degrees, my main goal has been to improve my own understanding of this degree in it’s own right, so the focus is on the symbols that are unique to this degree.

The Symbols

The Symbols that most stood forward to my attention are:

- ❖ The three-fold sign with it’s references to Joshua, Moses and Solomon.
- ❖ The Pass-word Shibboleth.
- ❖ Jephthah and the Ehpraimites.
- ❖ The Crossing of the Jordan
- ❖ The number 42, which is a symbol that should leap out to any fan of the author Douglas Adams
- ❖ The Word of the Degree
- ❖ And hence the Pillars and their form of making and decoration.

Let us look at each of these in turn and see what, if any, patterns of meaning reveal themselves to us...

The Sign : Joshua, Moses & Solomon

Joshua⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾ is an interesting name in it's own right, in it's English form it is essentially the same as Jesus, both being derived from *Yehoshua*. Further, it turns out that this was not actually Joshua's name⁽³⁾, according to the Book of Numbers his name was Hoshea the son of Nun until Moses decided to call him Joshua. This would seem to imply that Joshua may have been a title rather than a given name.

The name Joshua (Yehoshu'a) means "Yahweh is Salvation". Curiously, Joshua was also of the House of Ephraim, that Clamorous and Turbulent people we hear so much about in this degree.

The name Moses is not quite so easy to discern it's origin, there being a number of theories as to it's etymology, but Exodus 2:10 would seem to specify it's origin as the verb *Masha* which means "To draw", so Moses would mean "He who draws out".

Solomon's name equates to "Peace", but more interestingly he too had a second name or title according to the Bible⁽⁵⁾ – in 2 Samuel 12:25 "*and because the LORD loved him (Solomon), he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah*" This means "Beloved Of Yah".

Also of interest to us perhaps is that Solomon was known as the Third King of the United Kingdom⁽⁶⁾

The Pass-word : Shibboleth

"This Word is Shibboleth, which denotes P. and usually depicted in a FCL by an Ear of Corn near a stream of water"

In actual fact the word originates from the Hebrew word "shibbólet" (שִׁבְבוֹלֶת), which means the part of a plant containing grains, such as an ear of corn or a stalk of grain, or in older obsolete forms of Hebrew it can also mean stream or torrent. It is curious how our ritual alludes to the truth but does not explicitly state it.⁽⁷⁾

Jephtha & Ephraimites

The name Jephtha means "God Opens" while the most widely accepted meaning of Ephraim is "Twice Fruitful".

Jephtha's story is doubly interesting. According to Judges 11, he was the son of Gilead the king by a prostitute, but was disinherited by his brothers. It was only when the Ammonites made war against Israel that the elders sought him out from his self-imposed exile in the Land of Tob to be their leader. I can't help but wonder if there is a similarity here with the Stone that the Builder's rejected.

Furthermore, Jephtha made a vow to the lord that if he should give the Ammonites unto his hand, he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of the doors of his house on returning home unto the Lord, offering it up for a burnt offering. Unfortunately his daughter was the first thing to greet him so she became the sacrifice.

The exact nature of the sacrifice he made of his daughter, to which she apparently reluctantly consented, seems to vary according to which translation of the bible, or who's interpretation one reads. Possibly the more credible one is that she took a form of Holy Orders, particularly given the reference in Judges 11:39 to her knowing not a man after Jephthah doing to her that which he'd vowed to do.⁽⁸⁾

The River Jordan

Tied up with the account of Jephthah and the Ephraimites is the River Jordan. The name Jordan derives from the word יַרְדֵּן (*Yarden*), meaning "descend" or "flow down"⁽⁹⁾.

Perhaps more interesting to us is a connection with an earlier name in the degree – Joshua. It was Joshua ("Yahweh is Salvation") who lead the Israelites across the Jordan into the Promised Land. This provides an interesting contrast with the fate that fell the Ephraimites. The Ephraimites exhibiting what we might describe as pride and arrogance met a rather terminal fate in crossing the river, but the Israelites guided by Salvation in Yahweh enter the Promised Land – two rather contrasting outcomes to be sure.

The crossing of the Jordan also links to another Symbol prominent in the degree, the Pillars at the entrance to the Temple, but first, let us examine another Symbol connected with the Ephraimites.

The Forty and Two Thousand

Numbers indeed are symbols too and 42 is used in a number of interesting places, a couple of examples:

- ❖ Israel had forty-two campsites during their 40 year journey from Egypt to their promised land
- ❖ There are forty-two generations from Abraham to Christ

The apparent meaning of 42 comes from Leviticus 19: 23-24:

"When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. ²⁴ In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD.

A harvest in the 4th year is of course 3 ½ years since the crop was sown, or 42 months, which would tie in with the examples above – Abraham as the symbolic seed and Yehoshua as the fruit, similarly for the departure from Egypt and the arrival in the Promised Land.

3 ½ years can also be viewed as 1260 days based on a simple 30 day month, this being used in the Book of Revelation to describe periods of time during which the symbolic city was trampled underfoot or the two witnesses prophesied. Similarly, in the Book of Daniel a similar term is used which is "***Time, times and half a time***".

So here with the number forty two we would appear to have a period of time for a symbolic crop to develop followed by a distinct end to that period, either beneficial in the case of the Israelites crossing the desert, or negative in the case of the Ephraimites.

The Word – Pillars

The Word of the degree leads us of course into the Pillars, and with it another connection to a Symbol used earlier. The brass fittings of the Pillars were cast on the Plain of the Jordan between Succoth and Zarethan (1 Kings 7:46).

This is the same area where Joshua lead the Israelites across the river to the Promised land with the Ark of the Covenant holding back the waters for the crossing.

Succoth as a word means Booths, but as also related to the Festival of Succoth (Festival of Booths) which represents a Harvest type of festival is the Jewish calendar.

Also of interest is that Succoth is thought to be a high mound ⁽¹⁰⁾ and Zarethan is thought to mean "Great/Lofty Rock". Here either side of the crossing of the Jordan used by the Israelites, and by Hiram Abiff to cast the ornamentation of the pillars, are two natural pillars. Can we indeed view the Israelites and the Ephraimites as attempting to cross the waters between the two pillars ?

In examining the details given in the ritual about the Pillars, other connections were apparent. The pomegranates are said to denote plenty, but can also denote fertility and fruitfulness. More interestingly, in the corresponding passages of 1 Kings 7 that cover the pomegranates we find:

42 and the four hundred pomegranates for the two networks, two rows of pomegranates for each network to cover the two bowls of the capitals which {were} on the tops of the pillars;

Note how in verse 42 the numbers 4 and 2 occur again, giving us yet another connection to the concept of Harvest, this time in connection with the Pillars.

A Pattern ?

So can we perhaps view these symbols as having a discernable pattern ?

We have a number of references to fruitfulness, that which is Harvested (the ear of corn) and the Harvest itself. We have references to God opening, being salvation and perhaps a sense that the crossing of the river represents a test with two possible outcomes – death or the promised land.

Really though, we need a bit more proof, or at least evidence before we can jump to any real conclusions.

Working Tools

The Working Tools of the degree do perhaps support this to some extent. The Square, Plumb Rule and Level are all instruments that measure and assess, whereas the EA tools are all related to crafting or performing work and the MM tools are related to planning and designing.

This to my mind goes in the right direction, but it does not feel like it is enough to firmly support any conclusions.

Solomon's Temple

In looking for another form of confirmation or support I went back to the central motif of the modern Craft, King Solomon's Temple itself.

Where was King Solomon's Temple constructed ? According to 2 Chronicles 3:1:

¹ Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David.

In 2 Samuel 24:18

¹⁸ On that day Gad went to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite."

A Threshing Floor was the place where the crop was ground to separate the wheat from the chaff, as symbolized by the word Shibboleth.

Another interesting connection between the site of Solomon's Temple and the motif of Harvest is that in the hands of the Jebusites, the threshing floor and Jerusalem itself were originally sacred to the God Tammuz, who as known as Adon or Adonai of the Caananites ⁽¹²⁾⁽¹³⁾. Tammuz was a deity associated with the Harvest.

So here in the center of modern Freemasonry is reinforcement of the pattern of Harvest and Harvesting that we see in the Symbols of the Fellowcraft degree. The Temple Built without Hands is actually sited on a place of allegorical Harvest

Exploring this link a little further, we find Mackey in his Symbolism of Freemasonry has this to say about the Threshing Floor ⁽¹⁴⁾:

"Now there was in the old rituals a formula in the third degree, preserved in some places to the present day, which teaches that the candidate has come from the tower of Babel, where language was confounded and Masonry lost, and that he is travelling to the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite, where language was restored and Masonry found."

The names Araunah and Ornan seem to be used interchangeably in the Bible for the same person.

And also, from the Phoenixmasonry Masonic Museum website ⁽¹⁵⁾:

Mt. Moriah, on which the Temple of Solomon was built, is symbolically called the ground floor of the lodge, and hence it is said that "the lodge rests on holy ground." This sacred spot was once the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, and from him David purchased it for fifty shekels of silver. 2 Sam. 24:18-25 Recorded as Araunah. 1 Chron. 21:18-27 Recorded as having paid Ornan 600 shekels of Gold.

So here we find reinforcement of the idea that the Threshing Floor and with it the idea of a Harvest is at the center of the Fellowcraft. We are journeying towards a Harvest beyond which lies the Temple built without hands, and by implication the pre-requisite of entering or constructing the Temple is the Harvest.

But a Harvest of what ? The answer can only be a Test of what we were taught in the First Degree, Testing and measuring is of course the theme of the Working Tools of this degree. Freemasonry after all is a Beautiful and peculiar system of **Morality**, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols...

If we do not practice the morality of our Craft, our fate will be that of the Ephraimites – we will be the chaff separated from the real seed. If we do strive truly to become Masons, and not just wear our aprons, then we have the chance of symbolically crossing the river, or passing between the Pillars.

References

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