

3°

GRAND LODGE

South Australia and the Northern Territory Inc



3rd Degree Education

Information for the Master Mason

THE THIRD OR MASTER MASON DEGREE

Introduction

You have now had the privilege of being raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason. In a moving ceremony you were urged to 'perform your allotted duty while it is still day'. This means that you are encouraged to begin what many might call almost a new life. A life where you are asked to live up to the precepts presented and strive to fulfil the obligations of a Freemason; this before being unexpectedly, suddenly, overcome by ill health, accident or similar.

Life has constant reminders of mortality but we usually forget that death awaits us; which for most of the time is probably a good thing. However, wise people try to carry out their lives to account for it. Usually almost a taboo subject, death is not an easy subject to talk about. We plan our lives with faith and hope. Then, perhaps when we least expect it, we might suddenly find death approaching. It could happen at a time that prevents us from repairing the past or preparing for a future without us.

Here the Third Degree steps in. Its dramatic ceremony reminds us of our last hour on Earth. It stimulates our most serious thoughts. It encourages us to redirect our steps along that straight and undeviating line laid down in the Volume of the Sacred Law, giving attention to the duties we owe to ourselves, to our families, to our neighbours and to the Great Architect.

With its telling ceremony and ritual the Third Degree not only has provided us with a symbolic death but with a figuratively personal and spiritual rebirth.

THE MASTER MASON DEGREE'S ORIGIN AND THE DERIVATION OF ITS NAME

Pre-Grand Lodge of England

There are records of lodges scattered about England in the 1600's, when the Stuarts (1603-1688), originally Scottish kings, became kings of England. The later Stuarts were Roman Catholics, as secretly remained not a few country nobles and gentlemen, and it is thought that this leaning permeated many country lodges. On the other hand, lodges in Protestant London and regions nearby were mainly Protestant. These differences were to influence Freemasonry.

These old lodges had only two degrees, two old manuscripts surviving from the seventeenth century demonstrating this. These are the 'Sloane Manuscript', or Old Charge, of 1659, originally owned by a speculative English lodge, and the 'Edinburgh Register House MS', of 1696, originally the property of a Scottish lodge of mixed operative and speculative Masons. However, in 1711 the 'Trinity College, Dublin, Manuscript' refers to three degrees. Notice the difference in dates.

The beginning of the new century marked the beginning of change. In 1717 however, most lodges were still working at least two degrees, probably both on the same evening. The 'beautiful symbolism of the Hiram legend must have occurred early', writes (Jones:p 240, quoting Lepper) 'and not in the early 1700's'. It is probable that, says (Jones:233) "...the learned speculatives who came into Freemasonry in the 1600's may have been responsible for some elaboration of the ceremonies." "...we may reasonably conjecture whether, in the course of many decades prior to 1717, they took the ceremonial in hand and developed it."

The First Grand Lodge in England and Craft Degrees

In 1717 the first Grand Lodge in the world was formed. It was originally concerned only with the London region. Its degrees were limited: "...there was (Jones:233) in general a two degree system." The first Constitutions, 1723, of the Grand Lodge used the word 'Masters', but it referred only to members of the 'Fellow Craft' Degree. The second Constitutions, 1738, used the same word, but it then meant 'Master Mason'. It appears that between these years there was (Jones:235) 'development and recognition in general lodge practice of a third Degree – the Master Mason's Degree, the Hiram legend'.

Two Grand Lodges in England

The first Grand Lodge, 1717, had by 1738 adopted the title of the 'Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons'. This was a national time of political turmoil. The last of the Scottish-derived line of kings, the Catholic Stuarts, having been sent into exile, and with no direct heir waiting, Protestant England selected for its king a Protestant prince. Coming from Hanover, Germany, he became George I. London based, the Grand Lodge was anxious to be seen loyal to the new Royalty, and hence to Protestantism.

In the meantime quite a few people in the country, more particularly in remote areas, were still secretly Catholics. This was the open case in Ireland and the country highland regions of Scotland. Continuing to practise their old 'Catholic' Masonic rituals, in 1739 such English Freemasons began organising. In 1751 the organisation became public when they formed 'The Most Antient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons'. It was first led by an Irish noble and thenceforth by a noble Scottish family. It claimed to work the original form of Craft ritual, and also allowed many other degrees to be worked.

The Master Mason Degree

The earliest known reference to the name 'Master Mason Degree' is in 1727. The first official mention was in the Grand Lodge's Constitutions of 1738. But there is more to the degrees than that. It is time to quote directly from the authority of Jones (231).

"At this time when lodges were few in number and the country lodges were far apart, with each lodge a separate identity and owning – so far as we can see – not the slightest allegiance to any other body, it is obvious that each did more or less as it liked. Some lodges, both inside and outside the Grand Lodge organization, might not have discovered – certainly not adopt – the Third Degree until the middle of the century. It must be remembered, however, that the Grand Lodge was formed not to control the ritual of lodges throughout England but to provide a rallying-point for a few lodges of London and Westminster. It can therefore be well understood that lodges outside London and quite likely inside also, continued in their own sweet way to do exactly as they pleased in everything."

By 1730, however, the old degrees were changing, and many lodges were establishing a Third Degree system. According to their previous system, and remembering that the degree or degrees they worked were much shorter, and of material only somewhat equivalent to the present, the various lodges would have presented various degree combinations. These were two or three degree arrangements.

Up to the mid 1700s the Third Degree was often seen as optional, because any Mason with the Second could take any rank, from lodge to Grand Master. Like the Mark today, it was regarded as a degree that, if and when one wanted to, could be taken at leisure.

Each of the two Grand Lodges in England, the Antients and the Moderns, went on to develop degrees somewhat differently, further adding to specific differences. Of particular interest is the Royal Arch, which the Antients recognised from the beginning, but which the Moderns rejected as not being known earlier.

Their degrees were in the making right up to the Union of 1813 and beyond, when they were becoming more recognisably like those we know now. There was, however, still considerable variety. Because of the stricture never to write them we have only small evidence of their content and wording, except for the printed 'exposures', which are in many ways are now seen as deficient as to what was going on.

The Terms 'Master' and 'Master Mason'

From early Medieval times the operative stonemasons used the term 'master'. Jones (246) sums up the term as "A well-qualified English Mason became a master of his own calling; master and craftsman and fellow have the same meaning. The experienced Mason who presided over a lodge of operatives was its 'Master'; his office was a measure of the confidence his fellows reposed in him, and not his grade – as far as we know – acquired by submitting himself to any ceremony of an esoteric nature."

Any master could take on apprentices, which also aptly describes the name. If not in direct employ, usually by church, state, lord or a rich man, masters were building contractors. In the last hundred years the term Master Mason has shifted to Master Builder.

Now, in its Masonic or speculative meaning the term 'Master Mason' refers to a candidate who has been raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason.

References:

Jones, BE: Freemasons' Guide and Compendium, Harrap, London, 1950.

Lepper, JH: 'The Evolution of Masonic Ritual in England in the Eighteenth Century', AQC Vol 61.

PARTICULAR CONCERNS OF THE THIRD DEGREE

Obligation

The candidate swears to 'never improperly reveal the secrets and mysteries of or belonging to the degree of a Master Mason', to 'uphold the Five Points of Fellowship', 'maintain a Master Mason's honour, and to 'respect the chastity of those nearest and dearest to him'.

Probably vital to the maintenance of Freemasonry, Masonic secrets give members methods of recognition anywhere in the world and contribute to recruitment by enhancing Freemasonry's mystique and providing the allure of secrecy itself.

None of the three Obligations omit Masonic secrets. One of these is the Five Points of Fellowship, which stresses the need for togetherness, to help each other; a part of the outcome of which is to also help Freemasonry. Promises include maintaining a Master Mason's honour, which helps maintains his good standing and his dignity, and is of great value both the candidate and Freemasonry. To honour the chastity of a Brother's family is a fundamental point and another element in the honouring of a Brother and the movement.

The candidate further pledges to adhere to the principles of the square and compasses. These are basic instruments of geometry and therefore the building trade, and about which the Masonic system has many times taught. Their inclusion in the last Obligation shows that Masonic teaching finds the square and compasses to be of fundamental importance.

Reminder of the Principles of Moral Truth as First Taught in the First Degree

Their repetition demonstrates the great value Freemasonry places on the Principles of Moral Truth. You will recall that these are natural equality, mutual dependence, universal beneficence, charity, relief, consolation and The Great Architect Of The Universe.

The Principles of Moral Truth, as Taught in the Second Degree

Again, their giving demonstrates their importance. They are the intellect, heavenly science, God, nature, and intellectual truth.

The Exhortation

Before the Raising ceremony the candidate is told that nature instructs us how to die. However, to 'the just and honest man, death has no terrors equal to the stain of falsehood and dishonour' – the weighing of death against dishonour finds dishonour wanting. Masonry teaches that in death the tarnish of untrustworthiness follows, which is remembered by both men and God.

The Ceremony of Raising

The great subject of the Master Mason Degree is Raising. This is the chief topic of the Sublime Degree's symbols and allegories and the key to Freemasonry's teachings.

The Light of a Master Mason

The tenets given now include those concerning the grave, knowing oneself, the allotted task performance, the voice of nature and salvation through the Bright Morning Star.

The grave signifies symbolic death and then symbolic rebirth. Then, with the sudden appearance of the Emblems of Mortality, it is recommended that one gains knowledge of oneself. At this dramatic moment the candidate is urged to improve himself in preparation for the afterlife. He is also urged to perform his allotted task while it is yet day – this informs him that he has a task and that it has been set. Should he have previously thought that he indeed had a task, then that task might be larger than he had originally imagined.

The candidate is asked to continue to listen to the voice of nature, as it inspires confidence that The Great Architect will help a moral man to conquer death. We are asked to lift our vision to The Almighty, whose rising brings peace and salvation to the faithful and obedient. Thus, Freemasonry hopes that with the Volume of the Sacred Law and the help of its teachings this salvation will include its members.

The Tracing Board

The Third Degree teachings sum up the symbols on the Tracing Board. Death looms large in the minds of many: but above the emblems of death is a sprig of acacia. This sprig represents the soul's immortality. It reminds that by faith we shall yet triumph over death.

The porch, the dormer and the square pavement refer to our present life –

- The porch symbolises our life leading up to our confrontation with the veil of death.
- The dormer gives light to the porch, symbolising that it is the divine light of the Most High that gives light to our lives.
- The square pavement represents the chequered existence of life, comprised of good and evil, joy and sorrow and prosperity and adversity. We must weather these if we are to come ready to the veil.

The Working Tools

The degree's working tools, the skirret, the pencil and the compasses, remind us of the straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for us to follow throughout life. Further, the manner in which we do or do not follow this line is recorded by the Almighty, and that His unerring justice rewards or punishes accordingly.

Thus, the Working Tools re-enforce the Masonic message of how to qualify for the hope of eternal life.

The Charge

The Charge again puts forward the Landmarks, including a Master Mason's responsibilities regarding them. The Landmarks are fundamentally important to Freemasonry for its survival and growth. Not given, they are left to the determination of every Master Mason.

SYMBOLS AND ALLEGORIES OF THE THIRD DEGREE

The Third Degree contains or brings out the deeper meanings and teachings of our fraternity, and is the culmination of the degrees already experienced.

In the First Degree you were informed that you had undergone a new birth, a new entrance to the world. A rebirth. You were entering the world of Masonry, there hopefully to live a new kind of life. Your rebirth was revisited in the Third Degree when you were informed, “Your admission into Freemasonry in a state of helpless indigence was an emblematically representation of the entrance of all men on this their mortal existence.” On this Mackey (95) points out at the third stage of Masonry and life old age descends, terminating in death.

The Second Degree brought the concept of contemplation to the fore, and strove to increase a candidate’s enlightenment. But you knew that more was required – and it came in the form of a jolt! One that was introduced as ‘that last and greatest trial’.

The Third Degree, you found, is based around a great drama. Roberts, writing of newly made Master Masons, says, “You have actively participated in one of the greatest dramas of all time.” This dramatic ceremony ‘instructs you how to die’.

A significant feature of the beginning of this great drama occurs when the candidate is led to the East using steps as if stepping over an open grave. This symbolises that by taking the steps of faith we can step over and overcome death.

Hiram Abiff was slain because he would not divulge the genuine secrets of a Master Mason. With his death those secrets were lost, and it is symbolic that the Master Mason must search for that which was lost. The importance of this allegory lies in that we must search for attributes which we may never have had, had forgotten or had lost – ideals, standards and moral truth. Hence this is part of the need to know oneself.

The candidate is made to represent Hiram Abiff’s actual death. Decent into the grave confirms his symbolic death. The burial leads him to realise he needs to re-access his life. The burial itself symbolically informs the candidate that he should bury his past.

Representing the death of our Master Hiram Abiff probably had significant effects on the candidate. He will recall the experience of being beneath the white cloth. He is sure to have heard of people who, in times of probable imminent death, have 'seen their whole life' pass before their eyes. He may think – what happens to a man whom at the time of his greatest trial realises that he has disregarded all-important truths, many, perhaps, given to him by Freemasonry? To a man who has gone backwards instead of forwards? To a man who has who has lived unjustly? To a man who has ignored thought of The Great Architect Of The Universe?

The great drama continues. Representing 'our Master, Hiram Abiff', cruelly killed by three renegade masons, the candidate is symbolically raised from the dead. He is restored to a new life by the Five Points of Fellowship: brotherhood, support in a brother's laudable undertakings, helping a brother when he needs it, keeping a brother's lawful secrets and support of a brother's character. A fellowship whose faith has restored him to life. The candidate has been given his second symbolic rebirth, this time not from ignorance but from symbolic death.

The thinker and symbolist Wilmshurst (42) writes of the candidate, "All that has happened in the third degree is that he has symbolically passed through a great and striking change – a rebirth or regeneration of his whole nature." Unless he is devoid of much thought or emotion we must agree that the candidate has had an experience that will remain with him.

Wilmshurst (43) also writes "...the death to which Masonry alludes, using the analogy of bodily death and under the veil of a reference to it, is that death-in-life to a man's own lower self which St Paul referred to when he protested, "I die daily". The death of the 'lower self' can be expressed as the putting away of the corporeal body and bringing the soul, spirit or mind to the fore. In the ceremony of Raising Masonry provides an opportunity for a man to think more deeply about death, life, morals, The Great Architect Of The Universe and the eternal mansions of heaven."

Wilmshurst further writes (43-4), "In all the schools of the Mysteries, as well as all the great religions of the world, the attainment of the spiritual goal just described is enacted or taught under the veil of a tragic episode analogous to that of our Third Degree; and in each there is a Master whose death the aspirant is instructed he must imitate in his own person. In Masonry that prototype is Hiram Abiff; but it must be made clear that there is no historical basis whatever for the legendary account of Hiram's death."

There is also a wider picture covering the Third Degree and its predecessors. Roberts says (62), 'In the Entered Apprentice Degree the foundations of your spiritual temple were laid'. The 'framework was added' in the Fellow Craft Degree, 'according to age-old plans and designs'. In the Master Mason Degree you received 'lessons and teachings that are meant to be everlasting. They will be stored in your temple to be used now and throughout your life'.

This all-covering allegory of the spiritual temple finds that it was built to house the Masonic tenets and virtues given to the candidate.

CONCLUSION

The Sublime Degree of a Master Mason brings together and makes sense of the first two Degrees, deftly weaving their stories and teachings into Freemasonry's greatest message.

It may take some time to grasp fully the Degree's deep and symbolic meanings. Reading, experience and thinking will make it easier. It's for you to judge whether it's worth it.

References.

Dyer, Symbolism in Craft Freemasonry, Lewis Masonic, London, 1976.

Mackey, Albert: A Manual of The Lodge, Clark & Maynard, New York, 1862.

Roberts, Allen E: The Craft and its Symbols, Macoy, Richmond, 1974.

Wilmshurst, WL: The Meaning of Masonry, Rider, London, 1922.

MASONIC KNOWLEDGE DIRECTED AT DEATH

Death

Freemasonry helps prepare a Freemason for a subject almost taboo, death. The third Degree revolves around death. The candidate is told, "Nature, however, presents one great and useful lesson more. She prepares you, by contemplation, for the closing hours of existence, by means of that contemplation, she has conducted you through the intricate windings of this mortal life, she finally instructs you how to die."

In the First Degree a candidate was told, "Your admission into Freemasonry in a state of helpless indigence was an emblematical representation of the entrance of all men on this their mortal existence."

Masonry provided a personal rebirth. In the Third Degree, by figuratively descending into the grave, Freemasonry has given the candidate the experience of symbolic death.

The grave ceremony is an allegory in action. By demonstration it tells that the prime aim of Freemasonry is that a man who has lived a good life will be raised.
