

Symbolism - Pure and Applied Paper 1

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Albert Pike stated that Symbolism should be considered from a moral, political (sociological), philosophical and spiritual perspective.

The late Illustrious Bro. Alex Horne 33rd Deg. wrote that a symbol had greater import and significance than an emblem. A simple analogy would be to consider the flag of the United States of America and the flag of Great Britain. The Stars and Stripes to all Americans is venerated and to it, all U.S. citizens Pledge Allegiance. The wording of that allegiance is also endowed with powerful symbolism. The 'Republic (an Ideal) for which it stands, one Nation (unity) under God, (an invisible and supreme power) indivisible (implying a common goal) with Liberty and Justice for all. (application of individual freedoms within the framework of a Constitution)'. As such the Flag is elevated, respected and invested with idealistic principles and fulfills all off Albert Pike criterion of moral, political, philosophical and spiritual requirement to honor it as a Symbol.

The flag of Great Britain is no less significant to its citizens but is considered no more than an Emblem of the union in 1801 between England, Scotland and Ireland that created Great Britain. It is not elevated to the same status as the Stars and Stripes. A citizen of Great Britain will stand for the National Anthem and show respect to the flag but will not venerate in the same way as a U.S. Citizen will the 'Stars and Stripes'. The citizen of the United Kingdom will pledge fealty to the Monarchy.

Illustrious Rex Hutchens 33rd degree who was the Deputy General Grand High Priest of the General Grand Chapter International explains that the star is just a five pointed figure until it is put into a Masonic context where it represents the five points of fellowship, five senses, five orders of Architecture. The attachment of this elevates it to a symbol of Freemasonry.

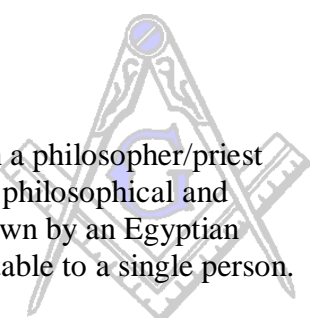
'A symbol is a material thing that is taken to represent something immaterial or abstract'. Let us explore just three sources from which these 'immaterial and abstract meaning' are derived.

Remember when you first began learning ritual and wondered where the words and phrases, that tormented your memory, were derived. You soon came to the conclusion that they could not have been the product of an illiterate craftsman who returned at the end of a twelve hour working day to contemplate on the metaphysical aspects of life! There is a limited volume of information as to the rituals of early operative masons. It is safe to conclude that these rituals and ceremonies were brief and possibly consisted of no more than an oath to bind the mason to the organization and a recitation of the Ancient Charges. In Scotland early records show that the Mason's Word may have been communicated which gave the Mason a means of identification.

The ritual of our degrees in Freemasonry is the product of Speculative Masonry. Where was it derived and who were the men that created it? Most of the men involved in the leadership roles of Freemasonry in the late 16th and 17th Century were Classical scholars well versed in Greek and Roman philosophy. They were conversant with the hidden mysteries that had been brought to Scotland and England during the Renaissance of the 14th Century.

For simplicity let us just consider four such influences:

These form the tools by which we examine Symbolism and see if it fits Pike's criterion that is, from a moral, political (sociological), philosophical and spiritual perspective.



Hermeticism: Before Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle there is said to have been a philosopher/priest who gave rise to inductive reasoning and was the forerunner and basis of all subsequent philosophical and religious thought. He is given the name of Trismegistus Mercurius Hermes and also known by an Egyptian name, Thoth. It may well have been that this was a school of philosophy and not attributable to a single person.

This philosophy is simply referred to as Hermetic and according to Manly P. Hall is one of the main influence upon the symbolism of Freemasonry. Hermeticism is the earliest Western concept of Universal Wisdom as inspired from one supreme source. It is a reflection of the individuals own relationship with God, derived from a new beginning and seen from the new perspective. It explores Universal Truth and seeks to conceal it in allegory and symbols. In the pursuit of this core of Universal Wisdom and Truth we are lead to attain a level of spiritual harmony. "True without error, certain and most true: that which is as that which is below and that which is below is as that which is above ... the father is the Sun, the mother is the Moon ... and the nurse thereof is the Earth ... Therefore, I am called Thrice Great Hermes having the three parts of philosophy of the whole world..." This was the 'touchstone' of future philosophers and the original concept that was considered acceptable to all the mainstream philosophy and religions of the world - including the early Christians.

Freemasonry is sometimes expressed 'As a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. We see references in the "Sun to rule the day, the moon to govern the night and the Master to rule and govern the Lodge ..." and again " ... that supreme intelligence which pervades all nature ...".

Pythagoras and his follows brought the concept of numbers, Mathematics and Geometry to the world. He with Thales and Plato traveled in his search for the hidden mysteries of the Persian Mithras cult and is said to have even gone as far as India in his pursuit of understanding the secret teachings. Plato philosophies further developed by Plotinus in the 1st Century A.D. formed the basis of classical education with philosophy, literature and a knowledge of Greek and Latin at its core and thus was a contributing influence upon the symbolism of Freemasonry.

Alchemy: From the earliest of times man sought herbs and remedies from his environment to cure sickness and injuries. The Medicine Man or Women assembled this knowledge and passed it to successive generations. Much of this knowledge preceding 2000 BC was passed on and found its way into the culture of early society. Preoccupation to find a Philosopher's Stone and the making of gold, silver and precious stones filled the minds of Greeks and Egyptians alike. Democritus (circa 450 B.C.) is said to have gained much knowledge from a Hebrew woman named Maria and the information preserved. We need to make a jump past the Arab, Caliph Omar in 640 AD to his attempts to discover the transmutation of metals, the Elixir of Life. His experiments with Mercury, Sulfur and Salt and the use of symbols for the elements, chemicals, constellations, beasts, man, woman and other properties. From the Witch's Cauldron and Merlin's Secret Potions through an evolution to the early Christian era of about 100-150 AD in which a Spiritual aspect was developed, Alchemy evolved to interest the minds of some of the great 15th to 17th Century scholars like Culpepper, Dee, Newton, Bacon and Ashmole. It was these and many other European Alchemists who began to write prolifically not only about their experiments but also on the philosophy of how the Universal and human Spirit could be improved. It is this Alchemaic philosophy that is concealed in symbolism and interwoven with Hermeticism to give us a Western Mystical Tradition. It is this Alchemaic philosophy that drives towards the elevation of the human spirit.

Cabala, Kabbalah and Quabalah: Is the knowledge derived from Jewish Tradition that is said to be concealed within the text of the Holy Bible and goes back to the earliest times. The most significant aspect comes in the 14th Century from a book named the Zohar (Book of Splendor) and from it is a graphical representation of the 'Tree of Life'. This is like a 'road map' by which we may discover a path towards spiritual improvement. It is composed of 10 focal points placed in three columns with 21 pathways connecting them. The three columns we recognize in Freemasonry as Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. From the Cabala these columns are referred to as

Wisdom or Mercy, Strength or Severity, and the middle path of Beauty or Harmony. Other interpretations do abound but essentially we look to see a Balance or Harmony between the two outer Columns - the thesis, antithesis and the synthesis. There are also representation on the horizontal level of four physical worlds.

Numerology studies the arcane significance of numbers, I will just mention that it is derived from Pythagoras and developed into a highly sophisticated system of patterns in the sequence and correspondence of numbers. I mention of the Tetractys and the Tetragrammaton in passing.

The Old Testament, Christianity, Gnosticism the ancient mysteries of early civilizations have added to the wealth of input that many scholars subscribe as being imbedded in the degrees of Freemasonry. It has been argued that Rosicrucianism of the 15th and 16th Century was also a major contributor. However, the jury is out as to what extent they and the Knights' Templar were the forerunners of our Masonic system and as interesting as it may be that is not the scope of this paper.

My purpose has been to introduce some, but not all of the basic tools by which we may begin to explore the great variety of symbolism in Freemasonry. We then derive an understanding of the layers of meaning and complexities of our degrees.

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