



The Overy Papers

Number 30 - The Importance of the Legend of Hiram Abiff

Fraternal Greetings Brethren

This paper has been adapted from a speech given by the late Most Worshipful Brother Conrad Hahn, in 1972 and is better suited to freemasons who are Master Masons. Mind you there are no secrets in it and may spur on our EA and FC members to enlightenment.

The legend of "Hiram, the widow's son," is the foundation of Freemasonry's ritualistic drama of the Master Masons Degree.

The secrets and symbolism, which it contains, are well known and it has become a part of the cultural heritage of Freemasons everywhere.

King Solomon and Hiram King of Tyre are mentioned many times in the Scriptures but very few mentions of our Hiram Abiff.

I used the King James Version of the Bible as my book of research to discover the closest the Scriptures came to our Hiram. I found him in the First Book of King Chapter 7 verse 13-14 that tells us, "King Solomon fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow son of Naphtali and his father had also been a man of Tyre and from the tribe of Naphtali. He was a worker in brass and was filled with wisdom, understanding and cunning to work all works of brass and he came to King Solomon and wrought all his work.

It then lists all the work he did in the building of the temple and that is all. He is not mentioned again as far as I could find so I assume he just went home.

I understand in some other translations of the Old Testament he was known as Hiram-Abi or Hiram Abi-ff or Hiram Abif. So looking these names we can see how Freemasonry may have settled on the name, Hiram Abiff as it matched the system of using his first name and followed it with a surname as this was system used at the time.

Although the most important element of Masonic symbolism deals with the death, burial and resurrection of Hiram Abiff, there is nothing in Scripture to support it.

Most Masonic Grand Lodges have stated that the account is not based upon fact, but rather is an allegory that is used to teach that part of the Masonic story of Hiram known to us and has a tragically different development.

So our story of Hiram Abiff starts the same where he worked for King Solomon at Jerusalem as a Master of the Works and a superintending architect.

From here the story is totally a Masonic allegory.

The 70,000 Masons who labored faithfully on the project were promised the status of a Master Mason, upon its completion.

Sadly before the Temple was completed, some of the workmen became dissatisfied and demanded the promotion, which they had been promised. They wanted the higher wages and fringe benefits of a Master Workman and tried to get them by threatening Hiram Abiff.

In spite of their threats, Hiram refused to yield to their demands and so they killed him in the unfinished Temple.

And that, is basically the legend of Hiram which has become in Masonry one of the most impressive ritualistic dramas of all time.

Historically-minded Brethren continue to wonder from whence it came, this story that is the core of "the sublime degree of Master Mason."

Certainly it is not to be found in the Bible. Hiram who is referred to in the Old Testament, has no story indicating he was assassinated.

We do know that no mention of Hiram is to be found in any of the Old Charges and Constitutions or in any old ritualistic practices of operative lodges before the founding of the first Grand Lodge, of Speculative Freemasonry in 1717.

Furthermore, Masonic scholars have shown that there was no three degree system of initiation during the period of operative Masonry and the Master Mason Degree did not exist before the creation of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717.

The first mention of the Hiram legend as the dramatic cornerstone of a Master Mason's degree appears, would you believe, in an expose' of the ritual of Freemasonry that was published in London in 1730. So it seems logical to assume that the Master Mason Degree, and the legend of Hiram Abiff, was introduced into Freemasonry after it became a speculative organization in 1717.

So where did the legend of Hiram come from? No one knows, maybe it comes from some mediaeval mystery play, whose original may yet be discovered in a private library or an ancient building.

These plays were called mysteries, not because they were a detective story but because they were produced by "mysteres," which is from the French word "mestaire," which means a craft or guild.

So these plays became known in England as mysteries, because they were produced by "mestaires," or guilds.

The expression, "The mysteries of Freemasonry," therefore, originally meant the ritualistic ceremonies, or work of the Lodge.

To those Masons who still thirst for the historical certainty about Hiram Abiff there is only one answer. It's not really that important.

Our Hiram legend is not history. There was a Hiram Abiff in history, but our Third Degree is not interested in him as such.

The drama of Hiram Abiff is a conflict of a man with other men, of an individual against evil forces embodied in other men. It is the symbol of the human soul, of me, of you, in fact of every man.

The work is symbolic of the work which we are all committed to perform and in the direction of our lives from birth to death.

The enemies that Hiram meets are really symbols of those failures of the spirit which in us and others, make war on our characters and on our spiritual aspirations. Hiram's death was also his triumph as the resurrection of truth over ignorance is always a victory, in spite of its being buried for a while in the rubbish of scorn and deliberate persecution.

So this is the real importance of the legend of Hiram, that it stirs men to serve the Truth by steadfastly maintaining the necessity of their noblest thoughts, even to apparent defeat in death, out of which can arise a more perfect Living Upright Man!

Edwin Booth, the famous actor and loyal Mason, evaluated the Hiram legend in these words:

"Despite my research and study, in all the masterpieces of Shakespeare and in my earnest determination to make those plays appear real, I have never met tragedy, as magnificent as the legend of Hiram Abiff.

To be a Worshipful Master, and to throw my whole soul into that work, with the candidate for my audience and the Lodge for my stage, would be a greater personal distinction than to receive the plaudits of people in all the theaters of the world."

And that should tell us that if we are True Freemasons, what we should do with the legend of Hiram, when we work in "The mysteries of Freemasonry." We must make it truly noble and Majestic.

Thank you and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

Bro. Bill Overy

Member of the Education Committee of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon.