

JACOB'S LADDER

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"And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and beheld a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and our descendants the land on which you are lying."¹

These words are the foundation of that beautiful symbol of the Entered Apprentice's Degree in which the initiate first hears". . . the greatest of these is Charity, for our Faith may be lost in sight; Hope ends in fruition, but Charity extends beyond the grave, through the boundless realms of eternity."²

The symbol of Jacob's Ladder is first encountered in the Book of Genesis wherein the Patriarch Jacob, fleeing his brother Esau, had left Beersheba for Haran, had stopped for the night, and dreamt of a ladder rising from the earth to Heaven. It is the only symbol used in Craft Masonry to be found formally within the Bible.

Before going further, we need to identify concepts.

A symbol represents a complex idea; it has a visual "face value" and a secondary, more conceptual meaning which has been ascribed to it. In other words, a symbol recalls a "story" behind it. Masonic symbols usually have a secondary or higher religious or spiritual meaning ascribed to them. Example: The Masonic setting maul symbol has the face value of its basic use to an operative Mason as that of a tool to set stones. To speculative Masons, it has a secondary meaning which represents a more complex idea or concept such as the way Hiram Abif met his death.

Emblems represent a specific group, quality or type; they have "face value" only. An emblem is an insignia, crest, patch; a trademark or logo. It is a distinctive design or visual object representing a quality, type or group. The Masonic square and compasses emblem represents Freemasonry as a group; it is our logo.

¹ Genesis 28: 10-13, NIV

² Presentation Volume, Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F. & A.M, p.67

Jacob's Ladder is the colloquial name for a connection between the earth and heaven that exists in many other belief systems. It is seen in Mithraism, a religious Persian belief practiced in the Roman Empire from the 1st to 4th Centuries AD; Brahmanism, an ancient Indian religious tradition practiced in the Vedic area (present-day Iran), and early Hinduism had its Ladder of Nature. Buddhism has its Ladder to Heaven and the ancient Egyptian religious texts described Gateways to Heaven in the pyramids. Among Cabalists, the ladder, or Tree of Emanation, represents the ten Sephiroths (from earth to heaven): Kingdom, Foundation, Splendor, Firmness, Beauty, Justice, Mercy, Intelligence, Wisdom, and the Crown, by which we arrive at the En Soph, the unknowable inner aspect of God.

In his noted *De Hominis Dignitate Oratio*, "Oration on the Dignity of Man",³ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola conveys that Jacob's ladder is a symbol of the progressive scale of intellectual communication betwixt earth and heaven; and upon the ladder, as it were, step by step, man is permitted with the angels to ascend and descend until the mind finds blissful and complete repose in the bosom of divinity. The highest step he defines to be theology, or the study and contemplation of the Deity in His own abstract and exalted nature.

Jacob's Ladder first appeared in Masonic ritual in the 18th Century, introduced in 1776 by Thomas Dunckerley, who is likely to have created the Mark Degree, heavily promoted the Royal Arch and served as the first Grand Master of the Masonic Order of the Knights Templar in England. In 1837, English author George Oliver wrote it was introduced in 1760 and some historians credit it to Marin Claire, who was Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England and the insertion of a simple allusion to the human senses, and to the theological ladder in Dr. James Anderson's lectures.

The Masonic Ladder presented in the First-Degree has rungs or staves representing the cardinal virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity, often called the Theological Ladder. Some early Entered Apprentice tracing boards describe a ladder of seven staves, the three principal virtues accompanied with Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice. Whether three or seven staves, Jacob's Ladder was early recognized as a symbol of progress.

The Winding Staircase and its Three-Five-Seven steps of the Second-Degree offers a parallel symbol to Jacob's Ladder. The Stairs are a representation of life; not the physical life, but the mental and spiritual life; of learning, studying, enlarging mental horizons and increasing the candidate's spiritual outlook.

Among Scottish Rite Masons, the 18th Degree Ladder of Kadosh consists of seven steps, from bottom to top is Justice, Equity, Kindness, Good Faith,

³ *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, University of Adelaide, South Australia, 2014,

Labor, Patience, and Intelligence, by which we arrive at perfection which represents Wisdom or Understanding. The idea of Intellectual progress to perfection is carried out by making the top round represent Wisdom or Understanding.

In Masonic ritual, Jacob's Ladder is a powerful symbol of how we can follow the teachings of the Volume of the Sacred Law, fulfil the moral and religious duties of our faith, and lead our thoughts toward Heaven. It is a symbol of progress, with its three principal rounds, representing Faith, Hope, and Charity, present us with the means of advancing from earth to heaven, from death to life—from the mortal to immortal. With the ladder resting on the Holy Bible and reaching to the Heaven we have Divine dispensation of Providence, which belief strengthens our Faith, and enables us to ascend the first step. Faith creates in us a Hope of becoming partakers of some of the blessed promises that enables us to ascend the second step. But, the third and last being Charity comprehends the whole, and he who is possessed of virtue of achieving the summit of his life into that ethereal mansion sealed from the mortal eye.

Thank you and ...

So Mote It Be!



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