

Masonic Stones

*Sir Knight Benjamin F. Hill, Knight Templar Cross of Honor
Grand Commander, Grand Commandery Knights Templar of Virginia 2020*

Introduction

A fundamental question, rarely asked, is the reason why our ancient brethren, who developed the complicated symbolic structures of moral and philosophical teaching we now know as speculative Freemasonry, would choose to base their system on such modest materials as the builder's trade, his tools and legends. Such activities as seafaring, metalworking, agriculture and husbandry, among others, could have been used just as well in developing a 'peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.' Indeed, they have been used for this purpose at one time or another, by various individual thinkers and organizations. ¹

However, the Stonemason's trade, and his material—stone—have such profound, far-reaching and universal significance and connotations that the choice was not only justified but inevitable. Stone has been, since prehistoric times, the principal material used to build and adorn important structures, where solidity and permanence are the paramount considerations. The deep and various meanings of stone as a physical object and as allegory make it easy to understand why the art of the builder should have been selected as the appropriate vehicle to convey the philosophical and mystical teachings of speculative Freemasonry in its different manifestations.²

The Medieval Stonemason

The medieval mason was a highly skilled craftsman who combined the roles of architect, builder, craftsman, designer, and engineer. Using only a set of compasses, a set square, and a staff or rope marked off in halves, thirds, and fifths, the mason was able to construct some of the most amazing structures ever built—Gothic Cathedrals.

Contemporary illustrations of master masons show them to have been prosperous middle-class professionals. The men they supervised, who did much of the actual carving and laying of stone, were like modern skilled tradesmen, and many younger men still learning the trade worked on the building sites as laborers. Masons shared their secrets openly and many medieval buildings imitate each other in style and technique.

¹ *Symbolism of Stone*, Leon Zeldis, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 106, 1993

² *Ibid*

The transition from operational stonemason to modern speculative Mason is difficult to determine as the origins of Freemasonry itself is not known, but it probable happened in the Scottish lodges of the early 1600s. The earliest known record of a guild, or lodge, accepting a member who was not a stonemason has been found in the records of an Edinburgh lodge in 1600.

Today's Free and Accepted Masons grew out of a great heritage of the Cathedral building during the European middle ages; the period between 1100 and 1400 AD. It was the period of the crusades, during which numerous major cathedrals, hundreds of major churches, and tens of thousands of parish churches were constructed throughout Europe. When we reflect on this period, three institutions come to mind - Guilds or Lodges, Masonry, and the apprenticeship system.³

Stonemasons worked on a building project for many years because of the limitation of their tools. On any construction, one of the mason's first acts was to erect a lean-to called a lodge. In this lean-to, tools were stored. Here they ate meals, initiated apprentices and conducted business. As they built, they moralized on the tools and their application to the job at hand, drawing parallels between the art of erecting stately cathedrals, and the philosophy of living as a just and upright man. The basic truths of morality were enshrined in a ritual surrounding the working of their trade.⁴

The Stones of Freemasonry

In the **Symbolic Degrees**, there are three stones prominent in our ritual: the cornerstone, rough ashlar, and the perfect ashlar.

The Cornerstone. In ancient times the cornerstone was a perfectly squared stone from which the remainder of the building could be plumb, squared and leveled; it provided the builder a point of departure, or reference, which insured that the structure would be properly built. Entered Apprentice Masons are taught that the first cornerstone is placed in the northeast corner of the lodge whereupon to erect the future superstructure, and this idea is extended to the erection of our inner temple, it being a spiritual building.

The ancient stonemasons used the plumb, square, level and trowel to set the stone. When they had cornerstone laying ceremonies to dedicate the building, they also used these tools just as we as speculative Masons use these tools, but to demonstrate moral concepts and standards of conduct of which all virtuous men approve. The plumb teaches Masons to walk uprightly before God and man; the square for virtue, "squaring our actions", the level to act upon

³ *Foundation Stones, Cornerstone Ceremonies and Other Masonic Stores*, Jerrold A. Wohlfarth, Grand High Priest 2007/2008, Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Mason of California, October 2011

⁴ *Ibid*

the level with all men; and the trowel to spread the bonding materials for friendship and brotherly love among all people. Just as our ancient Brethren dedicated cathedrals, we do the same. Corn, wine, and oil used in the ceremony are offered as symbolic gestures of reward for work which, in the past, were the wages of stonemasons. Thus, the corn of nourishment goes to those who toil; the wine to refresh; and the oil of joy to ensure the flow of good works to all mankind.⁵

The Rough Ashlar. *And the king commanded, and they brought great stones, and costly stones, and hewed stones, to lay the foundation of the house. "And Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders did hew them, and the stonesquarers; so, they prepared timber and stones to build the house."*⁶

An ashlar is a rough stone taken from a quarry with the intent of preparing it for use in construction of a building. Its shape is that of a plank or rectangular solid, which would allow its use for paving or exterior construction. In olden times these stones were from "freestone," which meant sandstone or limestone, which could be shaped easily into smooth blocks or other forms. It was the refining and smoothing that shaped these rough stones into their final form and thus "fitted them for the builder's use."

The Rough Ashlar represents a Mason's rough state in life and the need for improvement. He is made aware as a Fellowcraft of the goal of being a better man, being more spiritual in his thoughts, and striving for perfection in conduct. A path is laid before him and he is charged to work toward self-improvement. Duties, obligations, and expectations are clearly placed in his hands to work toward a better life. He is taught to "smooth" himself, both externally and internally, and become a true Mason.

There are other representations contained within the Rough Ashlar, such as the quality, potential, and character of the stone. The stone must be of decent quality and possess the potential to be a "perfect" stone in its use. It must have no flaws of character, which may cause it to weaken in its purpose or use. Thus, when we look at a candidate for the degrees, we should look carefully at their qualifications and character. The candidate must be of sound quality and have the potential to serve and support our Fraternity. He must be carefully inspected, as the Rough Ashlar, in order that he "fit" in the design of Freemasonry, its tenets, and goals.

The Perfect Ashlar. The rough ashlar is the stone taken from the quarry in its rude and natural state; the Perfect Ashlar is the stone made ready by the hands of the workmen to be adjusted by the tools of the craftsman. Masonry stresses that it "takes good men and makes them better"; the good man comes

⁵ Ibid

⁶ 1 Kings 5:16-17, NKJV

into lodge with rough edges all around, but as he learns the lessons of Freemasonry and applies them to himself, he becomes a perfect ashlar. By the Rough Ashlar we are reminded of our own rude and imperfect state by nature; by the Perfect Ashlar, that state of perfection which we hope to arrive by a virtuous education, our own endeavors and the blessings of God.

Chipping away at our many imperfections is an unending journey, but the journey itself is the ultimate teacher. Once a man is raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason, he is assumed to be a Perfect Ashlar. This is obviously incorrect, once a man is raised; his journey toward that level of perfection has only just begun. It begins with the promotion of study within the Lodge, the York and Scottish Rites, during our rituals, and how we can make it relate to today's environment.

In the **Mark Degree**, the overseers are charged to receive only the perfect ashlars, the square stones. Being the first step taken into the York Rite is a subtle indicator that only those who have taken the time to apply those lessons learned in the Symbolic Lodge upon their lives are fit for reception into the Mark Lodge and Holy Royal Arch Chapter.

The Keystone (Copestone or Capstone). *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”⁷*

The keystone is a significant symbol in the York Rite of Freemasonry, both in the Degrees of Mark Master and Most Excellent Master Mason, and figures in the unfolding Hiram Legend. In Masonic lore, Hiram the Builder, is the inventor of the keystone and its significance is lost upon his assassination. In the Mark Master's Degree, the ritual narrative centered around this stone recalls the biblical “stone the builders refused,” as the uninitiated, not knowing the purpose of the oddly-shaped stone, consign it to the rubbish heap. It is only rediscovered when King Solomon inquires after its whereabouts.

The letters inscribed are short for the coded phrase: “Hiram The Widows Son Sent to King Solomon,” an obvious cipher, the meaning of which is likely lost. In the Most Excellent Master Mason's Degree, symbolically, the keystone is the last placed, completing the arch created by the pillars Joachim and Boaz. The oddly-shaped keystone is a feat of early engineering, allowing builders to incorporate windows, doorways, and other building elements to a building without sacrificing strength. The main benefit of this innovation is to allow for much more natural light in a structure.

⁷ Revelation 2:17, NKJV

Probably the most beautiful symbol of Freemasonry is that of the Keystone and its lessons are: —it is the symbol of completion and gives two lessons from the ritual.

In the Mark Master's Degree, the lessons come from the ritual's two forces, the Craftsman and the Overseer. The first is the progressive mind, the latter the conservative. Both elements are present in society; both are necessary, even although they are opposing forces, because, when kept in balance, true progress is attained. Above all, be careful how we reject the thoughts, actions and discoveries of others. If we cannot accept, let us not judge harshly or condemn unjustly because we do not understand, or because they do not conform to our own preconceived ideas. Others have a right to their opinion and they may be as right as we are wrong.

In the lesson in the Most Excellent Master Mason's Degree, the keystone is the last stone placed in the arch, and as such represents completion, strength and perpetuity. Placing of the keystone in the symbolic arch of the Chapter, represents the completion of the individual Temple which each craftsman is erecting. Our spiritual Temple can be completed only by death, the great leveller, but if that Temple be built by plumb line, by level, and by square, we are taught that its foundations shall never crumble nor decay, and that when we have reached "that bourne from which no traveller returns" we may enjoy the fruits of our labours here on earth throughout the endless eons of time.

The Stone of Foundation is the name of the rock at the center of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is also known as the Pierced Stone because it has a small hole on the southeastern corner that enters a cavern beneath the rock, known as the Well of Souls. There is a difference of opinion in classical Jewish sources as to exact location of the Holy of Holies, but it is the holiest site in Judaism. According to Rabbinical writing of the Talmud⁸, the Stone of Foundation is the rock on which the world was created, it was the first part of the Earth to come into existence and upon this rock the Ark of the Covenant was placed in Solomon's Temple.

The idea of a World Stone of Foundation was most probably derived from the Book of Job:⁹

⁸ *Sages of the Talmud: The Lives, Sayings and Stories of 400 Rabbinic Masters*, Mordechai Judovits, Urim Publications, 2009

⁹ Job 3:4-7, NKJV

*Where wast thou, when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Declare, since thou hast such knowledge!
Who fixed its dimensions, since thou knowest?
Or who stretched out the line upon it?
Upon what were its foundations fixed?
And who laid its corner-stone,
When the morning stars sang together,
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

Freemasonry is focused on two temples. The first temple, in which the Lodge degrees of Ancient Craft Masonry are concerned, and the second temple, with which the Royal Arch Chapters, Knight Templar Commanderies, and the Scottish Rite Valleys reflect. The first temple is symbolic of the present life; the second temple is symbolic of the life to come. The first temple, the present life, must be destroyed; on its foundations the second temple, the life eternal, must be built.

The mystical stone was placed by King Solomon in the foundations of the first temple. The first temple of our present life must be built on the sure foundation of Divine Truth, "for other foundation can no man lay."¹⁰ But although the present life is necessarily built upon the foundation of truth, yet we never thoroughly attain it in this life. The Foundation Stone is concealed in the first temple; the Master Mason does not have the true word—only a substitute. In the second temple of the future life, we have passed from the grave; we have thrown aside the substitute for truth and the brilliant effulgence of the tetragrammaton and the Stone of Foundation are discovered, and thenceforth we are the possessors of the true word--of Divine Truth.

The Masonic Stone of Foundation is a symbol of Divine Truth, upon which all Speculative Masonry is built, and the legends and traditions which refer to it are intended to describe, in an allegorical way, the progress of truth in the soul, the search for which is a Mason's labor, and the discovery of which is his reward.

In conclusion, there are many rocks in the quarries of Freemasonry, be it in the Symbolic, Capitular/Cryptic, or Templar quarries of the York and Scottish Rites. The key is to focus on **Quality!** Build a high-quality Masonic organization with lofty standards. Masonry “takes good men and makes them better”—look for the inner-qualities of the man and educate him in a moral and ethical way of life. The Sublime Degree of Master Mason is not the end, but the Mason’s journey has just started an unending journey until he reached “that bourne from which no traveller returns” we may enjoy the fruits of our labours here on earth.

So Mote It Be!

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:11, NKJV