

Monthly Lodge Program – May 2008

**Origin of our Masonic Ritual**

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Masonic scholars have been trying for two hundred years to solve the Craft's greatest mystery, the origin of the ritual.

There are many imaginative stories that place Freemasonry back to the time of Noah and his sons and others that hold that Freemasonry was established by King Solomon with the help of Hiram, King of Tyre. But Masonic scholars believe that our modern Fraternity began with what we now call Operative Masonry, the old Craft guilds that worked on the great churches and castles of the period between 1200 and 1500 A.D., and which had organized Lodges and ceremonies.

By a process of gradual change this evolved into what we call Speculative Masonry, and was first organized into a Grand Lodge of Masons in London on June 24, 1717. The so-called Gothic Constitutions or Old Charges are the earliest proof of our modern Freemasonry. They consist of about one hundred old manuscripts, found in various places and now carefully preserved.

The original ceremonies were brief and simple. They consisted of administering of an oath of secrecy; the communication of the secrets; and the giving of the charges. From the beginning the signs and words, used to identify the operative and later the speculative Mason were strictly secret and unwritten. The charges on the other hand were read or repeated from memory; but they were not secret.

Each Lodge was a separate unit and the ritual became a matter of the Master's preference. A gifted Master or Masonic lecturer would frame a passage of appealing beauty. Soon others would use it and gradually it found acceptance in many Lodges. Thus there was a slow evolution in the ritual in the first several decades of the newly formed Grand Lodge, and it was several decades after the Grand Lodge was formed before any uniformity existed. Even today there are eight widely variant rituals in use in England, all accepted as valid and regular.

Early in Scottish Operative Masonry there were two ceremonies, one for the Entered Apprentices and a second for the Fellows of the Craft; however, there were no lectures as we know them today.

The evolution of the Master's Degree resulted from the introduction of the Hiramic Legend into the Master's degree, but we do not know very much about how that happened. We do know that the famous Masonic author, Dr. Anderson, made no mention of it in his Constitutions of 1723 but in the 1738 revised edition he refers to the "sudden death of their dear Master Hiram Abiff, who they recently interr'd in the Lodge near the Temple, according to ancient usage."

Where the legend came from no one knows. Hiram is mentioned in the Bible in I Kings and II Chronicles. He was also mentioned in the Cooke Manuscript of 1410. But the Graham Manuscript discovered in 1936 and dated 1726, and filled with Masonic ritual, tells of the legend of Noah wherein a valuable secret died with Noah. His three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth supposed that Noah had carried it with him into the grave and determined to exhume the body, "agreeing beforehand that if they did not find the very thing itself, the first thing they found was to

be kept to them as a secret. They found nothing in the grave except a dead body; when they gripped the finger it came away, and so with the wrist and the elbow. They then reared up the dead body, supporting it by setting foot to foot, knee to knee, breast to breast, cheek to cheek, and hand to back. One said there is yet marrow in this bone and the second said but a dry bone and the third said it stinketh."

Regardless of the development of the Hiramic Legend, we do know that our Masonic ritual came from the Grand Lodge of England which had split into the Grand Lodge of the "Antients," and the Grand Lodge of the "Moderns" until they rejoined as the United Grand Lodge, as well as from the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland.

Certain things remained constant when Freemasonry came to America and, indeed, were adopted by all of the Grand Jurisdictions in the United States. Thus, all American Lodges have a Master, two Wardens, a Secretary, a Treasurer, and an Altar with the Holy Bible. They all have the other Great Lights, lesser lights and three degrees. Most require a unanimous ballot, make Masons only of men, have the same substitute Word given in the same way, and are tiled. And they all dramatize and exemplify the Master's Degree, although the amount of drama and exemplification differs widely.

But beyond these and a few other simple essentials, there are wide variations from one Grand Lodge to another. Aprons are worn one way in one degree in one jurisdiction and another way in the same degree in another. Some States have more officers in the Lodge than others. In some jurisdictions Lodges open and close on the Master's Degree, others open and close on the First Degree, and still others open and close only in the Degree which is to be worked. And, although they all have a ceremony of

opening and closing, the form differs from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Some Lesser Lights are grouped closely around the Altar, in another they are placed *in a triangle to one side of the altar*, and in yet another they are found in the stations of the Master and Wardens. In some Lodges the immediate Past Master plays an important part, as in England. Some States have inner and outer guards, and some have two Masters of Ceremonies. Dividing, lettering, & syllabing also differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. *Obligations* show certain close similarities in some requirements, but, what is a part of the obligation in one jurisdiction, may be merely an admonition in another.

While there are these differences between Grand Jurisdictions, within a Grand Jurisdiction there generally is uniformity in the ritual and the work. But even this is not universal. There are several “workings” for instance, permitted in English Lodges. And even in some American Jurisdictions, such as Kentucky and the District of Columbia, not all Lodges use the same ritual.

The reasons for all these differences are complex, but relate first to the fact that the ritual in England itself changed over time.

Indeed, ritual changes in the Mother Grand Lodge led to its splitting into the Grand Lodge of the “Ancients” and the “Moderns,” but each of these Grand Lodges in turn was responsible for alterations in the ritual. It got to the point that members of each group found it impossible to make themselves known Masonically to each other.

When the two factions reunited in 1813, the new United Grand Lodge formed its ritual from the best of the divergent rituals

of the “Ancients” and the “Moderns”. It did not go back to the ritual used by the Mother Grand Lodge.

Second, when Masons came to America, they formed themselves into Lodges without Warrant or Charter well before there were American Grand Lodges. A dozen men might form a Lodge, and would bring with them parts of the ritual they knew – some from one source and some from another to make up the ritual they used.

Third, the ritual used by the oldest American Grand Lodges – Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina – derived from six different sources.

- The Mother Grand Lodge of England;
- The Grand Lodge of the “Ancients;”
- The Grand Lodge of the “Moderns;”
- The United Grand Lodge;
- The Grand Lodge of Ireland; and,
- The Grand Lodge of Scotland.

Massachusetts ritual was an approximation of the work of the Mother Grand Lodge, but her ritual today is derived from both “Moderns” & “Ancients”.

Pennsylvania and Virginia ritual derive from different variations of a combination of the ritual of the “Moderns” & “Ancients”.

While North Carolina ritual was almost purely the ritual of the “Moderns”.

And given these mixtures, the remaining American Grand Lodges received their ritual, at least in part, from one and sometimes more than one of these four Grand Lodges. If you

want more specifics, you should know that in 1915, Dean Roscoe Pound recorded in more detail how the various states received their ritual from the first four Grand Lodges.

Let me conclude by noting that these differences have been of concern to a number of Masons over the years and there were a number of efforts to try to unify and rationalize the ritual. These include the Baltimore Convention of 1843; the work of Rob Morris and his Conservators, and the work of Thomas Webb Smith and Jeremy Cross.

These efforts to unify the ritual were motivated by a desire to get back to the supposed pure ritual of the past, but they all failed. This was largely due to two factors.

The first was the effort of District Deputies, Grand Lecturers, Schools of Instruction, and similar machinery, to preserve in each jurisdiction what they supposed was in fact “ancient perfection.” These more learned Brethren largely supported the idea of uniformity and getting back to the pure ritual of the past, but they believed that their ritual was that pure ritual, and the other jurisdictions should change to what they were doing.

The second was the belief of the average Mason that what he had been taught when he learned the catechism had “existed from time immemorial,” and thus, any material change from that which he had been taught about the ritual, the degree forms, ceremonies and practices, usages and customs was wrong.

These two factors have combined to prevent significant changes in the ritual used by any of the Grand Jurisdictions and there is little reason to believe that greater uniformity will be possible in the near term.