

The Freemasons Key
A Study of Masonic Symbolism

Edited by Michael R. Poll

The Freemasons Key

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Table of Contents

What Is Symbolism?	
by R. J. Meekren	1
The System of Symbolic Instruction	
by Albert Mackey	11
The Symbolism of Solomon's Temple	
by Albert G. Mackey	14
Symbolism in Mythology	
by C. T. Seago	23
Evidences of Symbolism in the Land of the Incas	
by Hiram Bingham, Ph.D	28
The Initiatory Rites of Druidism	
by Dudley Wright	32
Masonry Among Primitive Peoples	
by J.W. Norwood	39
The Dionysiac Artificers	
by Albert Mackey	45
The Secret of the Old Operative Masons	
by P.A. Fenger	52
Lodge Furnishings and Degrees	
by Henry R. Evans, LITT. D.	56
The Use and Symbolism of Color in Masonry	
by Frank C. Higgins	60
The Symbolism of Numbers	
by H.A. Kingsbury	65
Symbolism of the Three Degrees	
by Oliver Day Street	69
The Word of God	
by Joseph Fort Newton	142
The Mystery of Masonry	
by Joseph Barnett	147
The Psychology of the Lodge Initiation	
by G. Garland Riggan	150
Monitorial Symbolism of the Third Degree and its Application to Every Day Life	
by George Dern	162
The Origin of the Legend of the Third Degree	
by R. J. Meekren	175
Some Notes on the Meaning of the Word "Freemason"	
by H. L. Haywood	180

The Interlaced Triangles	
by Dudley Wright	189
Early Craft Symbolism	
by R. J. Meekren	193
The Symbolism of the Old Catechisms	
by R.J. Meekren	205
Speculative Symbolism	
by R. J Meekren	220
The Bible in Masonry	
by Joseph Fort Newton	229

The Freemasons Key
A Study of Masonic Symbolism

What Is Symbolism?

by R. J. Meekren

A SUBJECT that perennially crops up among Masons whenever they are discussing the more serious aspects of the Institution is symbolism. It might well appear, judging by the flow of books and articles on the symbols and symbolic teaching of Masonry, that the subject must be worn quite threadbare, yet even a casual acquaintance with what has been written will show that this is not the case, indeed it will often appear that the would-be expositors are more in need of explanation than the symbols of which they treat. It would, therefore, seem that it might be better to attack the problem from a different angle, for a problem Masonic symbolism has certainly become. To adopt the words of Paul the Apostle, it is foolishness to some and to others a cause of stumbling and misapprehension.

Mackey, whose explanations of Masonic symbolism, in spite of much that is questionable, are probably still the best and safest, speaks of a "Science of symbolism," and he would define Masonry as a "system of morality developed and inculcated by the science of symbolism." Strictly speaking, in the present day sense of the word, there is no such thing, and what it is proposed to do in the present article is to approach the subject from the strictly scientific point of view.

Those who are at all acquainted with the story of the development of our modern science, the really great achievement of our civilization, are aware that the great strides that have been made in all directions in recent years have been in part due to the breaking down of the old water-tight compartments that separated one science from another. The comparative method has been the potent apparatus by which so much has been done in the latest investigations, especially in subjects dealing with man himself, individually and collectively. It fact, many subjects not long since regarded as quite unsusceptible to scientific treatment have been elevated into sciences properly so-called through the application of this method alone. The problems of the different forms of religion among the various races and peoples of the earth have very largely been elucidated by comparing them together, and obscure survivals in one explained by cases where the custom or belief was still in full force. And later still much has been done by considering them in the light of psychology. Nothing is actually isolated in the world, we have to distinguish and separate, ana-

lyze and abstract, in order to deal with the raw material of knowledge, the multitudinous phenomena of the world around us. This is the only way in which we can deal with it, and our minds are formed innately and by habit to so function. But when this has been done, if we forget (as it is so very easy to do) that our subject, our generalization or abstraction, is intimately connected with other things at every point we lose all sense of balance and proportion, and what knowledge we have gained becomes in truth more or less falsified because we have lost the reality of its place and connection in relation to the whole.

As an example, a very simple and obvious one we distinguish in our own bodies various members and organs. In this case we are not likely to forget the connection we are not likely to deem the hand an entity apart from the arm to which it belongs, or the brain that directs it according to sensations received by the eye or ear. But a mountain is as much a part of the earth as the hand is of the arm, or the earth part of the solar system. The abstract formulae of mathematics or chemistry are no more than representations of the normal, usual or habitual way in which things behave, as much so as when we generalize about our fellows in saying one is generous, or another irascible, or another virtuous. Usually we prefer to say, speaking of inanimate things, the invariable mode of action rather than habitual. But we cannot logically use this or like terms absolutely, for our knowledge is based on a quite limited amount of experience, and we are never likely to be able to demonstrate that there are not minute variations in the reactions of material objects. Human beings, and even animals, as individuals, show much variation, but in the mass can quite well be covered by cut and dried rules as statistical research has shown. So many individuals in a thousand will die in a certain time, so many will be born, so many get married and so on. It is true that the rates are variable from place to place and time to time, but we are dealing with groups of individuals all of whom are highly variable in themselves. If such groups can be so accounted for in useful fashion, if they exhibit a tendency to act as a whole according to a rule or law, much more will groups of individuals or units whose variations are very small, such as the supposititious systems of molecules that form the material objects of everyday life according to the accepted hypothesis of physical science. The point is that the tendency of thought is always to make absolute and invariable entities out of limited generalizations. We speak of justice, or fortitude, and immediately that principle of action or disposition of mind assumes a separateness and

distinctiveness that it has not really got in itself. This is true all through the whole field of experience, from a boy's interest in batting averages to the business man's rules for disposing of routine matters in his office, from the infant's first distinctions of distance between the toy offered to it that it can grasp and the electric chandelier for which it reaches in vain, to the biologist's classifications of living organisms into groups and families and varieties. And so in dealing with Freemasonry, those who are seeking further light, once they have acquired the rudiments of the subject as taught in the lodge, can hardly have it too often impressed upon them, that Masonry cannot be understood fully as an isolated fact. Its history cannot be properly understood in ignorance of the secular history of the countries and communities in which it has appeared, its laws cannot be appreciated without reference to the science of jurisprudence in general, its objects, its *raison d'etre* must be interpreted in the light of social organization in general, and so too with regard to its symbols.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD DISCUSSED

As a first step it may be useful to see what the word symbol actually means. Generally of course everyone knows its signification, but the history of a word and its use often gives fresh light upon it. Webster's dictionary tells us it is "the sign or representation of something moral or intellectual by the images or properties of natural things," gives as synonyms, emblem, figure, type. A sentence from Samuel Taylor Coleridge is quoted in further elucidation: "A symbol is a sign included in the idea it represents — an actual chart chosen to represent the whole, or a lower form or species used as the representative of a higher in the same kind." It is also used in place of letter, or character, as in algebra and mathematics generally.

The word itself is pure Greek, transliterated without any change but the dropping of the case ending. *Symbolon*, (the Greek letter "u" is usually represented by "y" in English) is "a sign by which a thing is known or inferred," it is used generally in Greek in the sense of sign, mark or token. *Sumbola*, symbols, in Greek, were the same thing as the Latin *Tesserae hospitalis*, pieces of bone, coins, or other objects broken in two, part being kept by each of two parties as a pledge and proof of friendship. In principle these were essentially the same thing as the medieval "tally," which was a piece of wood split in two, after various notches had been cut on it, as a mutual record of an account. Or the original form of *cheque* in which the paper was torn in two, the

fitting together of the two pieces being a proof of its genuineness. The derived meanings of the word in Greek thus came to be the half of anything, a corresponding part, a ticket, a permit or license, a verbal signal, a watchword, any distinctive mark, such as the "Confession of faith" in the Christian Churches, or the outward sign of a conception or idea.

An allied word *Symbolaion* had the meaning of "a mark or sign from which a conclusion is drawn" and came to be used for a covenant, contract or bond. Both of these words were derived from *Symballein*, which is literally "to throw together," a word used in very many ways, as to meet together, to fight. But among the secondary meanings are those of guess, conjecture, interpret, understand, compare, reckon, compute and agree upon.

From all this we can see the line of development of meaning in this term, from things put together, compared together, to things taken as representing other things with which they have previously been put, compared or associated. There is nothing mystical, abstruse or far fetched about all this. It is a matter of every day usage. Limiting the meaning of the term in accord with ordinary usage, to objects or representations of objects, that are taken to mean some other thing or group of things not so easily described or depicted, we can still find plenty of symbols in every day use wherever we choose to turn. Some are very modern, as for example the trademarks of manufacturers, the badges of societies, and some very ancient, as the letters of the alphabet. As is well known the latter were in their origin pictures of actual objects, which were conventionalized into pictographs such as were many of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and then by further simplification becoming ideograms, like the characters of Chinese writing. How far we should be justified in calling such designs, or graphs, symbols in the stricter sense above defined, is open to question, but when these characters ceased to be taken as representing an idea but were used to designate a specific soul, they certainly became symbolical. The letter "A" in Greek is *Alpha*, from the Semitic, *Aleph*, which meant ox. The original form of the letter was a drawing of a bull's head. In the course of transmission, after it had become purely symbolical, the letter got turned upside down. "B" is *Beta* in Greek, which is from the Semitic *Beth*, a house, and was originally an outline drawing of a house.

This process, however, does not altogether fit the definition given by Coleridge, as here we have the greater representing the less, instead of the reverse, as he postulates. Yet though the sound of the

letter "A" is a simpler and a lesser thing than Aleph, the ox, of which it is the first phonetic element, yet as a whole the use of alphabetic writing is an enormous advance on pictographic or ideographic. In any case whether the meaning ascends or descends the principle of using one thing to stand for another is the same.

SYMBOLS ARE NOT OBSOLETE

Modern symbolical devices, such as the use of a wheel in design for the badge of an automobile association, of a wing to represent an aviator, or a word made up of the initial letters of the full name of a firm or company, all these are too much in evidence to need more than a bare notice in passing. Arbitrary designs or trademarks would not, in the restricted sense, properly be called symbols, but rather emblems or tokens (in the general sense). In the minds of those who adopt them there is usually some connection or association that would tend to bring them into the class of symbols properly so-called. And here we reach the psychological aspect of the subject. Though by usage we limit the word symbol to an actual object, or the representation of an object visible and tangible (or at the least a reference in words to such an object as being real and actual) which is taken to mean something else, yet we must not allow ourselves to be led to isolate the process of symbolizing from the other mental processes or modes of expression in which one thing is compared or associated with another and then used to represent, describe or suggest it. Such rhetorical devices for example as metaphor, simile, allegory and like figures and modes of speech are psychologically exactly the same kind of thing as symbols.

WORDS ARE SYMBOLS

As a matter of fact, many, perhaps the majority of words are the fossilized relics of forgotten analogies, metaphors and symbolisms. For example, take the word cylinder, which to most men will at once recall an essential part of an engine. It is derived from a root meaning to roll, and from that root was named a form of solid that would easily roll, a roller that is. This is perhaps a secondary development, but let us take the word pipe, which probably makes most people think of another mechanical artifact, a hollow piece of metal usually. The root of this word is the same as that of "peep," a chirping or whistling noise. This is itself probably onomatopoeic that is, derived from a

conventionalized spoken reproduction of the kind of sound intended. From this it is applied to a musical instrument devised to make such sounds, such as the flute, whistle, or panpipes, and as these were all essentially pieces of wood, metal or other material with hollow ducts, the word finally comes to mean such objects for whatever purpose formed. Take another word at random, the word "attend" will do. A meaning that will perhaps first occur to mind is that of being "present at," not however just being present somewhere, but at a special kind of occasion, nearly always implying the presence of other people as well. The root of the word means simply to stretch. From mechanical or physical stretching it is applied metaphorically to a stretching or tension of the mind, to pay attention to something. From this it passes to the sense in which one gives attention to another person, as a physician attends his patient, and from that to attending a meeting, or a church service where attention will be given to the proceedings. This sort of thing could be illustrated from half the words that might be found in the pages of a dictionary, and very likely if we knew more of ultimate derivations from the great majority of words in all languages. Figurative and symbolical language is especially the province of the poet and orator, but every metaphor and simile, even of the most commonplace character and used by most matter-of-fact people, is of the same kind thing. Either original or secondhand symbols are our counters of conversation, and even in the driest and most precise of technicalities may be traced what originally were fresh and poetic comparisons and analogies. Except for an irreducible minimum of purely imitative word is probably the most of our words were thus formed, and even the former really follow the same principle, as to imitate a bird's note, a dog's barking, a cow's lowing, brings those creatures to mind, the characteristic call or cry of each standing as a representative of the individual. Some words in use among us are patently thus originated – as the names of a chickadee and bob-o-link and whippoorwill.

SYMBOLISM BASED ON ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

Indeed the principle thus seen to be the underlying ground of symbolism is possibly the characteristic mode of operation of our minds. Some psychologists have referred all thinking to the association of ideas. This as a theory is probably not now very widely accepted, but it does undoubtedly have a large place in our mental pro-

cesses and it includes the kind of comparison that we are specifically dealing with. Psycho-analysts would have us believe, not without considerable warrant in fact, that we are all of us symbolists without knowing it, that our dreams are elaborate and intricate systems of symbols representing unconscious and repressed tendencies and wishes. Whatever judgment may be passed on this theory such explanations it least again bear witness to the universality of the principles involved, for even if they import a symbolic meaning into phenomena in which it really does not exist, it at least is an instance of the faculty of symbolizing, of setting one thing to mean another.

The net result then of this preliminary survey is to show that the use of symbols is a normal resource of humanity in the expression or recording of thoughts and ideas. If this be so why is it that so many are moved to impatience and even disgust with the elaborate symbolical explications of Masonry that form such a considerable part of the literature of the Craft? This is a question that could only be fully answered in detail, but in general this aversion and impatience are probably very frequently due to a feeling that these intricate systems are either not true, or if true are of no importance. Such an impression is, we must confess, in many cases more than justified. But the fault lies not with the employment of symbols but with the manner or purpose of their employment. We do not quarrel with language or condemn its use because some people tell us lies, or others bore us with uninteresting relations of unimportant events. The fundamental trouble with most of the elaborate interpretations of Masonic symbols is that their authors have tried to read something into Craft teaching that was not properly there. Perhaps it is not quite accurate to say properly there. It was Adam Weishaupt who said in defense of his system that no one had propounded an explanation of Masonry or an account of its object that received the consent of anyone else and that in such a confusion of opinions he felt quite justified in adding another. The truth must be confessed that Masons have never been agreed just what the teaching of Masonry really is, or perhaps more accurately, what it should be; and every would-be Masonic prophet and teacher has assumed, or attempted to give the impression, that his explanation was the original and authentic one, and was concealed in the symbols of the Fraternity by the mythical sages who founded it.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

However, these brothers are not to be condemned without deliberation; the ground of their offending may turn out to be a trivial matter or one of detail only. One of the essentials of symbolism, of metaphor and simile, is suggestiveness, which means, worked out in fact, that everyone has suggested to him not wholly what the speaker or teacher has in mind, but largely what he has of his own to bring to its interpretation. In technical language, and most of our everyday language is the same kind as what is strictly called technical, suggestiveness, vagueness, is as far as possible eliminated. When a surgeon speaks of making an incision, or of the articulation of a joint, though the words were originally figurative, in usage they have come to designate very definite ideas. So when the mechanic speaks of a rivet, a bolt and nut, or the exhaust of an engine; again all these words were originally applied figuratively but understood very precisely. So also in such everyday words and phrases as eating, getting up, cutting, and hundreds of others, the meanings are so clearly defined that we all probably have about the same mental reaction to them, that is, they have the same import to the hearer as to the speaker. But when one describes the heat of summer, and says the "air in the streets was like the blast of a furnace," we all realize that he means it was very hot, but we all picture it differently according to our own experience. One who knows furnaces will conceive it differently from one who knows only the kitchen fire.

It would be easy to select scores of illustrations from literature of this kind of thing. Certain metaphors become fashionable, and then they start on the downward path, and may eventually desiccate into technicalities. In general it is unsafe for anyone to use a figure or a symbol that is out of his own experience, the chances are a thousand to one he will not get it quite right. That has been one great fault of many writers on Masonic subjects. They have attempted to develop the allegorical use of Craft symbols with no knowledge of operative Craft technique; as, for instance, when Mackey speaks of the squaring of stones being less skilled work than that of setting them and therefore left to the apprentices, whereas in fact it is rather the reverse. It is easily seen that here he was constructing a supposed technical fact out of the allocation of working tools to the three degrees in Speculative Masonry. Some such errors are even to be found in our rituals, as where in one degree something is said to be done "on the point of the chisel under the pressure of the mallet." This almost re-

minds one of the famous definition of a crab, that it is a red fish that walks backward. A chisel is a tool with an edge not a point, and a mallet gives rather an impact than a pressure.

This kind of mistake is more likely however to be made in the secondary development of a symbol or group of symbols than in the original choice, and for a good reason. A symbol or emblem (we are still using the words in their widest sense) is first adopted to express some idea, and to express it intelligibly; for by this time it should be clear that the primary function of symbolism is to express, to reveal, not to conceal. Medieval craftsmen were at one in this with Greek sculptors and primitive picture writers. One universal kind, that in a restricted sense might not be allowed the name symbol, is the attribute. An object which serves as a label. For instance a statue of a woman with a bow and quiver is Artemis, with spear and helmet probably Athene. A naked man with a harp is Apollo, with club and lionskin Hercules. So the Medieval artist put in the wheel of St. Catherine, the lamb of St. Agnes, the keys of St. Peter. This is quite elementary and due to simple association of such objects in the story of the person represented, but it leads on to the symbolic representation of abstract ideas. Before the writer lies a plate showing insignia adopted for the Army of the United States. For the medical service is a winged staff with serpents twined round it – the attribute of Aesculapius, the god of healing. For foreign service is a partial view of the statue of Liberty, for the musical service a conventional lyre, for the engineers a castle, for aviation a perspective outline of a flying plane. This last and several others not mentioned are on the first or pictographic level merely. The second of those mentioned suggests that those who have been on foreign service will have seen the statue of Liberty. The castle of the engineers represents one of their chief functions, the designing of protective works. We see in this modern instance a great variety of reason for adopting the specific designs, and this has always been the case. The choice of an emblem or symbol is due very largely to accidental circumstances, which also accounts for the fact that the same object can represent different ideas, as the anchor is the badge of naval service and also an emblem of hope. And on the other hand the same idea can be symbolized in many different ways. We may have an inflamed heart for charity, or a woman caring for little children. A torch or a lamp or a book may represent knowledge. The torch again may mean truth. Justice is represented by the balance, and also by the sword. The one thing is that there should be some direct or indirect association that gives an intelligible and natural connection between

the thing represented and the object representing it. This, of course, is contrary to the received doctrine that symbols were chosen to conceal secret doctrines from all but the initiated. That they have never been used in this way would, of course, be going too far. But even here the general rule holds good, the symbol must be obvious in meaning to those in the secret. The appropriateness of a symbol depends on a common experience. The pictographic airplane is obvious in meaning to all of us today. The more subtle symbol of the statue of Liberty would be clear on reflection to most Americans, but might be very obscure or unintelligible to people in other countries. The staff of Aesculapius requires a knowledge of ancient mythology to appreciate fully, though it of course has become almost as conventional as the letters of the alphabet.

The symbol then is intelligible naturally and obviously to the group with the same kind of experience as the one who chooses it. If the early Christians used the fish as a secret sign it was obvious to them, it had references to baptism as well as representing in a kind of picture puzzle a confession of faith. Jesus Christ the son of God, the Savior. For the initials of this phrase in Greek, *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter*, spell *Iethus*, the word for fish. The drawing of a fish therefore became at once a symbol of the faith and a token of recognition.

The conclusions then that we must come to are that Masonic symbolism, in the first place, is no mystical or abstruse thing apart from everyday life, but rather quite normal and inevitable; and secondly that the primary meaning of these symbols is an obvious one so long as we keep in touch with reality. It may not be always obvious to the uninitiated because he has not had the same experience. It may not always be obvious to the uninstructed Mason because the original fitness of the choice may have lain in a state of affairs now passed away. To understand such as these wider knowledge is required parallel to that necessary for the full explanation of the badge of the medical service, or how "B" came to represent a certain consonant. But after this it must be remembered that the advantage of symbolism is in suggestiveness, and that everyone brings some new element to its interpretation, every one if he looks can see some new shade of meaning. For those who like definite statements we can conclude by saying that the primary, simple and obvious meaning is the authoritative and authentic one, so far as these qualifying words apply, but that any meaning the individual can find for himself is also just as legitimate so long as it is in accord with the primary significance.

The System of Symbolic Instruction

by Albert Mackey

The lectures of the English lodges, which are far more philosophical than our own — although I do not believe that the system itself is in general as philosophically studied by our English brethren as by ourselves — have beautifully defined Freemasonry to be “a science of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.” But allegory itself is nothing else but verbal symbolism; it is the symbol of an idea, or of a series of ideas, not presented to the mind in an objective and visible form, but clothed in language, and exhibited in the form of a narrative. And therefore the English definition amounts, in fact, to this: that *Freemasonry is a science of morality, developed and inculcated by the ancient method of symbolism*. It is this peculiar character as a symbolic institution, this entire adoption of the method of instruction by symbolism, which gives its whole identity to Freemasonry, and has caused it to differ from every other association that the ingenuity of man has devised. It is this that has bestowed upon it that attractive form which has always secured the attachment of its disciples and its own perpetuity.

The Roman Catholic church is, perhaps, the only contemporaneous institution which continues to cultivate, in any degree, the beautiful system of symbolism. But that which, in the Catholic church, is, in a great measure, incidental, and the fruit of development, is, in Freemasonry, the very life-blood and soul of the institution, born with it at its birth, or, rather, the germ from which the tree has sprung, and still giving it support, nourishment, and even existence. Withdraw from Freemasonry its symbolism, and you take from the body its soul, leaving behind nothing but a lifeless mass of effete matter, fitted only for a rapid decay.

Since, then, the science of symbolism forms so important a part of the system of Freemasonry, it will be well to commence any discussion of that subject by an investigation of the nature of symbols in general.

There is no science so ancient as that of symbolism, and no mode of instruction has ever been so general as was the symbolic in former ages. “The first learning in the world,” says the great antiquary, Dr. Stukely, “consisted chiefly of symbols. The wisdom of the Chaldeans,

Phoenicians, Egyptians, Jews, of Zoroaster, Sanchoniathon, Pherecydes, Syrus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, of all the ancients that is come to our hand, is symbolic." And the learned Faber remarks, that "allegory and personification were peculiarly agreeable to the genius of antiquity, and the simplicity of truth was continually sacrificed at the shrine of poetical decoration."

In fact, man's earliest instruction was by symbols. The objective character of a symbol is best calculated to be grasped by the infant mind, whether the infancy of that mind be considered *nationally* or *individually*. And hence, in the first ages of the world, in its infancy, all propositions, theological, political, or scientific, were expressed in the form of symbols. Thus the first religions were eminently symbolical, because, as that great philosophical historian, Grote, has remarked, "At a time when language was yet in its infancy, visible symbols were the most vivid means of acting upon the minds of ignorant hearers."

Again: children receive their elementary teaching in symbols. "A was an Archer;" what is this but symbolism? The archer becomes to the infant mind the symbol of the letter A, just as, in after life, the letter becomes, to the more advanced mind, the symbol of a certain sound of the human voice. The first lesson received by a child in acquiring his alphabet is thus conveyed by symbolism. Even in the very formation of language, the medium of communication between man and man, and which must hence have been an elementary step in the progress of human improvement, it was found necessary to have recourse to symbols, for words are only and truly certain arbitrary symbols by which and through which we give an utterance to our ideas. The construction of language was, therefore, one of the first products of the science of symbolism.

We must constantly bear in mind this fact, of the primary existence and predominance of symbolism in the earliest times. when we are investigating the nature of the ancient religions, with which the history of Freemasonry is so intimately connected. The older the religion, the more the symbolism abounds. Modern religions may convey their dogmas in abstract propositions; ancient religions always conveyed them in symbols. Thus there is more symbolism in the Egyptian religion than in the Jewish, more in the Jewish than in the Christian, more in the Christian than in the Mohammedan, and, lastly, more in the Roman than in the Protestant.

But symbolism is not only the most ancient and general, but it is also the most practically useful, of sciences. We have already seen