Masonic Degree Rituals

Masonic lodges observed a great variety of rituals, which served to induct men into the Fraternity and to pass on its esoteric knowledge. The rites also offered them spiritual purification, drawing on long traditions of esoteric thought and symbolism. A number of manuscripts describing Masonic initiation rituals and "catechisms," probably used as memory aides, survive from the turn of the eighteenth century. The earliest known such document is the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript, which was found in a government archive on a folded sheet of legal paper labeled "some questions anent the mason word 1696." The manuscript is believed to reflect the practices of the Edinburgh lodge, which at the time was composed predominately of operative stonemasons, and it shows an already fairly complex system of rituals and esoteric symbols, built upon two degrees of initiation: Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft.[98]

The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript forms a natural starting point for a consideration of the three basic "Craft" degrees of Masonry and the system of beliefs that they propagated. It would be impossible to examine exhaustively the mythic and ritual structures

[98] Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 19-20, 31.

reflected in the manuscript, but we must consider a few central patterns that the document reveals. The first is a chain of correspondences connecting the individual body to the cosmos. The manuscript begins with a catechism of questions "that Masons use to put to those who have ye word before they will acknowledge them"; these questions discuss the "lodge" as an imagined sacred space housing symbolic images, much like the Hermetic memory temple. For instance, the questioner asks the visitor, "Are there any lights in your lodge," to which he responds, "Yes three the north east, southwest, and eastern passage. The one denotes the master mason, the other the warden, The third the setter croft."[99] At the same time, the lodge is set in parallel with the individual body. When the questioner asks, "where shall I find the key of your lodge?" the visitor responds, "three foot and a half from the lodge door under a perpend esler and a green divot. But under the lap of my liver where all the secrets of my heart lie." Thus, the imagined lodge building represents at once a social and physical gathering space and an individual man's body, in which he carries the Masonic secrets. The final questions put to a man claiming to be an Entered Apprentice drive this association home:

Q: Which is the key of your lodge.
A: a weel hung tongue.
Q: where lies the key.
A: in the bone box.

According to later catechisms, the "bone box" is either the mouth or the skull.

At the same time, while the preceding questions associate the lodge downward, in a series of correspondences with the individual body, other questions associate it upward, as an image of Solomon's Temple:

[99] The entire manuscript is reproduced in Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 31-4. I have interpreted "s w" as "southwest" on the basis of the same passage in the near-identical Chetwode Crawley Manuscript, reproduced in Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 35-8. The phrase "setter croft" appears to be unique, and in the Chetwode Crawley Manuscript appears as "ffellow craft."

Q: How stands your lodge
A: east and west as the temple of jerusalem.
Q: Where was the first lodge
A: in the porch of Solomons Temple

In addition, the passwords of the two degrees of initiation, guarding the lodge's sacred space, are "Jachin" and "Boaz," the names of the pillars flanking the entranceway to Solomon's Temple. The Masons' Old Charges, or mythic histories, claimed that the Fraternity's customs originated from the construction of the Temple, and their myths particularly linked the Fraternity with Solomon and Hiram of Tyre.[100] The esoteric intelligentsia of the 1600s venerated Solomon's Temple as the symbol of a divine order on Earth—or more properly, a microcosm of the universe, modeling the relations between the human and divine worlds.[101] The catechism in *Masonry Dissected*, first printed at London in 1730 and reprinted at Newport in 1749/50, further develops the theme of the lodge as a sacred space corresponding both to the Temple and to the cosmos: when asked how high his lodge stands, the Entered Apprentice is to answer,

A. Inches, Feet and Yards innumerable, as high as the Heavens.
Q. How deep?
A. To the Centre of the Earth.

Furthermore, the lodge recreates the sanctity of holy buildings by mimicking their east-west orientation:

Q. How is [the lodge] situated?
A. East and West.
Q. Why so?

[100]H. L. Heywood, "The Matthew Cooke Manuscript with Translation," *The Builder*, 1923, reproduced by Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/cooke.html>, accessed 2 August 2014; Knoop and Jones, *The Medieval Mason*, 170-6.

[101] Laura Leibman, "Sephardic Sacred Space in Colonial America," *Jewish History* (2011) 25: 13–41; Jonathan Sheehan, "Temple and Tabernacle: The Place of Religion in Early Modern England," in *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, Pamela H. Smith and Benjamin Schmidt, eds. (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 248-72.

A. Because all Churches and Chappels are or ought to be so.

The correct orientation of the lodge—whether literal or merely figurative—traces both the path of the sun and the corresponding path of the pilgrimage toward knowledge. The lodge master stands "in the East," because "as the sun rises in the East and opens the day, so the master stands in the east to open his lodge," and the visitor professes to be travelling from west to east "to seek that which is lost and is now found."[102] Masons took this orientation seriously—in 1802, Thomas Smith Webb supported a proposal to rearrange the furniture of Saint John's Lodge of Providence in order to move the Worshipful Master's chair away from the doorway; some Brethren objected, insisting that the Master must sit in the east. Webb responded that the "east" was merely symbolic, and that the room's literal physical arrangement was immaterial.[103] The incident is interesting in part as an illustration of the tension between literal and figurative interpretations of ritual, which seems to be universal to all religions.

In sum, the symbolic world of Masonry revolved around a vertical axis: a chain of sympathies and correspondences connecting the human body to the lodge, the Temple, and the cosmos. One gained access to this symbolic world through rituals of initiation, which prepared the mind and body to enter a new realm. The Edinburgh Register House manuscript gives a rough outline of the rituals of initiation for the Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft degrees, which later manuscripts and printed exposures tend to fill in with more detail.[104] The Apprentice

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[102] Prichard, *Masonry Dissected* (London: J. Wilford, 1730).

[103] Leyland, *Thomas Smith Webb*, 116-17.

[104] Knoop and Jones find, contrary to the opinions of earlier scholars, that the printed exposures of Masonic ritual dating between 1725 and 1750 tend to be fairly consistent with one another and with the manuscript catechisms, and for the most part can be taken as authentic. What is more, the Grand Lodge in London took *Masonry Dissected* of 1730 entirely seriously as an exposure of Masonic secrets; in response to the pamphlet the Grand Officers mandated that no man could be admitted to a lodge unless a Brother the present recognized him. Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 9-18.

initiation begins with the candidate being placed on his knees after "a great many ceremonies to frighten him," and putting his right hand on a Bible. The Brethren "conjure him to secrecy" by administering an oath and threatening "that if [he] shall break his oath the sun in the firmament will be a witness agst him… which will be an occasion of his damnation and that likewise the masons will be sure to murder him." The casting of the sun as a judging witness prefigures the appearance of the "All-Seeing Eye," or an eye surrounded by a sunburst, as seen on Masonic certificates, carpets, and aprons of the eighteenth century.

Having accepted the oath, the candidate is ready to be exposed to Masonic secrets. The youngest of the Brethren then leads the candidate out of the lodge, "where after he is sufficiently frighted with 1000 ridiculous postures and grimaces," he is taught "the signe and the postures and words of his entrie." Having mastered these, the candidate returns to the lodge, makes a "ridiculous bow," swears to "keep the keyes" (meaning secrets) of the lodge, "under no less pain than having my tongue cut out under my chin." Thereafter, "all the masons present whisper among themselves the word beginning at the youngest till it come to the master mason who gives the word to the entered apprentice."

The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript demonstrates several important facts about Masonic ritual. Firstly, it is not only a record of verbal knowledge but a manual for enacting a drama that no document can fully capture. The Entered Apprentice ritual and the catechism reveal that the Masonic secrets are bodily just as much as they are verbal or conceptual. Every stage of the ritual is punctuated with dramatic physical actions and movements. For example, when describing the penalty for divulging Masonic secrets, the initiate "makes the sign again with drawing his hand under his chin alongst his throat." Even in the catechism, the manuscript includes rudimentary stage directions, noting that the visitor must identify the penalty for

revealing secrets, "which is then cutting of your throat, For you must make that sign, when you say that." On a practical level, all of these bodily movements surely help to ingrain the secret knowledge in the candidate's memory, while symbolically, they underscore the parallels between the corporeal body and the social body of the lodge; one could not truly learn the Masons' secrets by reading a printed exposure, but only by experiencing the ritual in action.

The physical nature of the Masonic secrets only becomes more important in the second, or Fellow Craft degree as described in the Edinburgh manuscript, which includes the "Five Points of Fellowship." The Fellow Craft initiation follows the exact same structure as the first degree, only with a new set of secret words and signs. At the conclusion, the candidate places himself "in the posture he is to receive the word" and greets the company present three times. Finally the lodge Master approaches the candidate and "gives him the word and gripes his hand after the masons way, which is all that is to be done to make him a perfect mason." The secret grip, only alluded to in the ritual directions, is described in more detail in the catechism: the new Fellow Craft must embrace his Brother "foot to foot Knee to Kn Heart to Heart, Hand to Hand and ear to ear," at which point the two men whisper to one another the passwords, Jachin and Boaz. (The "Five Points of Fellowship" vary slightly in later manuscripts.[105]) The Five Points of Fellowship are a complex exercise that can probably only be learned by muscle memory, reflecting the essential connection between verbal and bodily knowledge in Masonry.

Another dimension of Masonic ritual that the Edinburgh manuscript makes explicit is the manipulation of emotion. The author only alludes to the preparatory stages preceding the

[105] For example, in the Sloane Manuscript, ca. 1700, the Brethren stand "close with their Breasts to each other the inside of Each others right ancle joints the masters grip by their right hands and the top of their left hand fingers thrust close on ye small of each others backbone and in that posture they stand till they whisper in each others eares the one Maha- the other repleys Byn." Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 42.

administering of the candidate's oath, calling them "a great many ceremonies to frighten" the initiate; similarly, when he withdraws, he is "frighted with 1000 ridiculous postures and grimaces."[106] Far from undermining the seriousness of the ceremony, for most candidates, these "ridiculous" practices only heightened it. The "solemnity" of Masonic ritual, as so many Masonic authors called it, was closely connected to fear.

The reasons that Masons chose to frighten their candidates extend beyond the need to deter new members from divulging Masonic secrets, and can only be fully appreciated in light of the purposes that initiatory rituals tend to serve. The initiations described in the Edinburgh manuscript and later exposures conform to the basic patterns of "rites of passage" as practiced in many societies throughout the world. As the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep finds in his famous 1909 study, *Les Rites de Passage*, many societies practice similar "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another."[107] These ritual processes tend to be patterned on the rites of territorial transition performed at borders, gates, or thresholds, which usually involve prayers or offerings.[108] Seeing as how social worlds are divided into sacred realms in much the same manner as buildings, cities, and lands, social rites of passage mimic threshold ceremonies. When a person joins a social group or takes on a new office, he or she undergoes rituals involving three stages:

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[106] The Masonic scholars Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones suppose that these episodes of "horseplay" characteristic of operative initiations must have been dropped from the more "dignified proceedings" of speculative lodges. They fail to consider that the mild hazing referred to in the Edinburgh manuscript was intended not to amuse but to frighten, and that even the most formal and serious ceremony may include elements intended to confuse and disorient. Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, p. 19, 27-28.

[107] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Vizedom and Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 10.

[108] Ibid, 18-23.

"separation," in which one severs one's existing ties; "transition," in which one exists in a suspended, in-between state, often likened to death; and "incorporation," in which one bonds to the new social group and begins a new life. The ceremonies as a whole serve foster attachment and conformity to the new group and to smooth the traumatic abruptness of the change.[109]

In Masonry, the symbolic parallel between the threshold and the entry into a social group is made explicit. The imaginary doorway of the lodge is marked by Jachin and Boaz, the pillars that flank the entranceway to Solomon's Temple, demarcating the threshold of a sacred space. The Fellow Craft's catechism recorded in *Masonry Dissected* involves a careful delineation of spaces in the Temple through which the Brother has passed, from the "porch" (or Entered Apprentice degree) to the "middle chamber" (or Fellow Craft degree); the questioner asks,

> Q. When you came through the Porch, what did you see?
> A. Two great Pillars.
> Q. What are they called?
> A. J. B. i. e. Jachim and Boaz.

Furthermore, the Masonic rites of initiation practiced in the eighteenth century follow the basic tripartite structure of rites of passage, as an examination of surviving documents will show. Later books published in the eighteenth century give greater details as to the Masonic rites than the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript does. The Masonic exposure *Jachin and Boaz: or an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry*, first published in London in 1762, provides a detailed account of Masonic rituals purportedly in their "Ancient" form and probably provides the closest possible facsimile of the Craft degrees as practiced in Rhode Island in the later eighteenth century.[110] The initiation ritual described in *Jachin and Boaz* follows the same basic

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[109] Ibid, 26-40.

[110] Like *Masonry Dissected, Jachin and Boaz* became popular among Masons as a handbook and aide-mémoire. It was available for sale in Newport within a few months of its first publication in 1762,

format as that recorded in the Edinburgh manuscript, but includes more details about the beginning of the ceremony, which represents the "separation" phase of the rite. It begins with the Brother who initially proposed the candidate announcing that the latter is ready to undergo the ritual. The sponsor then leads the candidate into a separate, darkened room, where the he removes all metal from the initiate's person—"buttons, buckles, rings…and even the money in his pocket." In some cases, the candidate is even obliged to remove clothing containing lace (presumably because lace may contain gold or silver threads). The sponsor then has the candidate uncover his right knee, ordinarily by rolling up his breeches or pants, and places an unwieldy slipper over his left foot or shoe; he is then blindfolded and left in the dark and silence for about half an hour.[111]

The long wait in silence allows time for the Brethren to prepare the lodge room with the necessary objects and images—but it also completes the stage of "separation," which involves the symbolic cutting of ties with one's old self, a literal or figurative stripping down, exemplified in this instance by the divestment of possessions and clothing. The period of darkness and silence further forces the candidate to leave thoughts of the outside world behind, and probably puts him into a trance-like mental state with the senses heightened.

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and according to Masons who later testified before the Rhode Island Assembly, it was used by Masons in the state as a guidebook until replaced by Webb's Monitor in 1802—although the oaths, obligations, and rituals were generally committed to memory, with printed documents serving only as a supplement. Arturo de Hoyos, "Introduction," In Arturo de Hoyos, ed., *Light on Masonry* (Supreme Council, 2008): 18-19; *Newport Mercury*, September 7, 1762, p. 4; Jeffrey Croteau, "Are Early Masonic Ritual Exposures Ant-Masonic?", Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, <http://nationalheritagemuseum.typepad.com/library_and_archives/2010/05/are-early-masonic-ritual-exposures-antimasonic.html>, accessed 4 August 2014; *Report of the Committee Appointed*, Appendix, p. 75-81, 93.

[111] *Jachin and Boaz*, 1762, p. 7-8.

Next, the "transitional" stage of the rite takes place in the lodge room. The Brethren prepare the room with three lit candles around a central altar supporting a copy of the Bible open to the Gospel of John, and on the floor a carpet or chalk drawing showing the layout of the lodge. In due time, the sponsor knocks on the door of the lodge room, and the candidate is prompted to announce himself "as one who begs to receive part of the benefit of this right worshipful lodge." The lodge's two wardens open the doors and lead the candidate, still blindfolded, into the room and around the drawing or carpet three times. Although *Jachin and Boaz* does not mention it at this point, all other early descriptions of the first degree attest that the candidate is led with a rope around his neck. In addition, according to one Rhode Island Mason's testimony, Brethren would accentuate the atmosphere of menace "by making noises, shuffling on the floor, [and] throwing sticks down." Finally, the Master asks the candidate if he wishes to be initiated, of his own free will. After he answers in the affirmative, the Worshipful Master instructs, "let him see the lights," and his blindfold is removed. The Brethren form a circle around him, draw their swords, and point them at the candidate's breast.[112] At this point, *Jachin and Boaz* observes,

> the ornaments borne by the officers, the glittering of the swords, and the fantastic appearance of the Brethren in white aprons, all together, creates great surprise, especially to a person, who for above an hour [sic] has been fatigued with the bandage over his eyes; and his uncertainty concerning what is further to be done for his reception, must, no doubt, throw his mind into great perplexity.[113]

The candidate is then led forward to the altar in front of the Master's chair, with one of the assistants showing him how "to step in the proper manner." He kneels on his bare right knee, and

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[112] Jachin and Boaz, 8; Dumfries no. 4 manuscript, in Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, p. 56; testimony of Benjamin W. Case, *Report of the Committee Appointed*, Appendix p. 76.

[113] *Jachin and Boaz,* 9.

with the point of a compass pressed to his breast, he agrees to a solemn oath to keep the Fraternity's secrets, on pain of death.[114]

Through all of this process, the candidate's humbled position—disoriented, partly blinded, and led with a rope around his neck—resembles the symbolic death characteristic of the transition stage of many rites of passage. The initiate's state of fear and "perpelexity" surely helps to impress upon him the profundity of the change he is undergoing. In addition, as Victor Turner has observed, many rites of passage, especially in the transitional phase, involve ritual humiliation; he theorizes that the loss of social dignity in these ceremonies points to the baseline of social equality or "communitas" upon which superstructures of hierarchy and social deference are built, and helps to create a bond of solidarity among the initiates who have experienced the same ordeal. Having plunged back to a state of subjection, the initiates are ready to be invested with the powers and dignities of a new state: in Turner's words, "it is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew."[115]

Finally, the initiate and his new Brethren perform a series of acts typical of the incorporation stage of the rite of passage. Having completed his oath, the initiate kisses the Bible. He is then taught the "sign, grip, and password" of the Entered Apprentice, and he learns the symbolic moral meanings attached to the various tools and other images depicted in the carpet or floor drawing. His possessions are restored to him and he takes a seat at the right hand of the Worshipful Master. The Brethren give him an apron and a list of lodges. After congratulating the new Brother, the members of the lodge retire to table for a meal.[116] According

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[114] Jachin and Boaz, 9-12.

[115] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

[116] Jachin and Boaz, 12-13.

to van Gennep, rites of incorporation usually involve gestures of intimacy, such as kisses, gift exchanges, and shared meals.

In some respects, the Apprentice initiation and other Masonic degree rituals resemble the rites of passage surrounding young people reaching adulthood in many societies. As van Gennep points out, it is common for the cults of adult men and women in tribal societies to perform initiations in which "mysteries," or the meanings of sacred objects, are revealed, much as the symbolic meanings of the tools and of the layout of the lodge are explained in a Masonic initiation. Additionally, the new initiates often receive masks or other ritual clothing, as the new Mason receives his apron.[117] However, the social function of Masonry was different; like the mystery cults of antiquity, the Fraternity's secrets were reserved for only a small minority, while others remained "profane." The Masonic manipulation of space and light, too, find their closest parallels in the classical mysteries; the Eleusinian cult reportedly led its candidates through a long series of darkened underground chambers, representing the underworld, before leading them upward into a brightly lit sanctum, much as the Masonic candidate sits in a dark room before emerging into the candlelit lodge.[118] These practices underscore the rituals' function as a kind of spiritual rebirth, which the Masons sometimes stated explicitly: in 1786, the *Providence Gazette* reprinted the charge that a German count delivered at his son's Masonic initiation in which he asserted that, "this moment, my son, you owe to me a second birth."[119]

While the basic outline of the Apprentice initiation follows van Gennep's model of the rite of passage, its more peculiar details defy easy accounting; we have reached the limits of

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[117] van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 78-83.

[118] van Gennep, Rites of Passage, 89-92.

[119] *Providence Gazette*, April 1, 1786, p. 2.

synchronic explanation. The unique aspects of Masonic rituals that distinguish them from other rites of passage suggest a deeper diachronic link to Eurasian shamanism. Most importantly, all of the surviving early descriptions of Masonic initiations stress the importance of the candidate's single shoe, bare knee, and awkward gait. According to *Jachin and Boaz,* during the festive meal after the initiation, the initiate must learn to recite descriptions of the form of his initiation, the longest of which is the response to the question, "How was you prepared, Brother?"—

> I was neither naked nor cloathed; barefoot nor shod, deprived of all metal; hoodwinked, with a cable tow about my neck, where I was led to the door of the lodge in a halting moving posture.[120]

The catechism in *Masonry Dissected* includes the same description, almost verbatim; the catechism of the Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript, recorded in the Old Lodge of Dumfries, Scotland, around 1710, includes the following questions:

> Q. Hou were you brought in
> A. shamefully wt a rope about my neck
> Q. what pouster were you in when you Receved
> A. neither sitting nor standing nor running nor going but on my left knee[121]

Likewise, *A Mason's Confession* of 1727 attests that the keeper of the door "looses the garter of [the candidate's] right-leg stocking, rolls down the stocking, folds up the knee of the breeches, and requires him to deliver up any metal thing he has upon him." When taking the oath, the candidate "is made to kneel upon the left knee, bare."[122]

The consistency of these odd aspects marking the candidate—the bare knee, the missing or covered shoe, and the shuffling or sideways gait—suggests that they carry a symbolic importance. The historian Carlo Ginzburg, in examining the records of the Inquisition and other

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[120] Jachin and Boaz, 14.

[121] Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript, in Knoop and Jones, Early Masonic Catechisms, 56.

[122] *A Mason's Confession*, in Knoop and Jones, eds., *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 94.

evidences of popular mythology and folklore, finds a widespread persistence through much of Europe of a "Good Society," a group of men and women with the ability to leave their bodies on certain nights of the year, to combat evil spirits, and to commune with the dead. Though any formal rites had died out, some such men and women continued to engage in ecstatic journeys as late as the seventeenth century. The folk beliefs surrounding the Good Society apparently have their roots in an enduring stratum of Eurasian shamanism, according to which certain special individuals can travel to the world of the dead and return. As mentioned earlier, many Eurasian folk myths assert that such travelers are marked by an asymmetry, particularly in their leg or foot, which causes them to limp or shuffle; they are half of this world, half of the other. Many legendary figures such as the Fisher King, Achilles, and the Biblical Jacob combine half-lameness with half-death. The ancient mystery cults and folk rituals apparently employed this symbol of liminality; depictions of novices in the Dionysian and Eleusinian cults show them wearing one sandal. The single bare foot both induces the desired limp and emphasizes the shaman's direct contact with the underworld; like *A Mason's Confession*, *Jachin and Boaz* specifies that the candidate "put his right knee on the stool, which is bare," and after taking the oath, he sees an image of "the tomb of Hiram, the first grand master, who has been dead almost three thousand years."[123]

That folk shamanic beliefs, such as "second sight," formed part of the cultural background of early modern Scotland seems certain, although their exact influence on Masonry may be impossible to trace. The possibility that shamanic ecstasies survived into the eighteenth century in Britain or North America is more tenuous. Ginzburg argues that the ecstasies of the Good Society were "deformed" by ecclesiastical prejudice into the diabolical witches' Sabbath;

[123] Ginzburg, *Ecstasies,* 96-104, 155-70, 226-47; Jachin and Boaz, 10, 12.

if this is the case (and some historians doubt it, although they accept the persistence of shamanism in the early modern period), then some distorted memory of the shamanic rites survived into the 1700s in the form of folk beliefs in the witches' nighttime flights and spectral appearances.[124] The Masons, like the Good Society, gathered "invisibly" on appointed nights of the year to perform secret rituals, surrounded by symbols of death and immortality; the parallels may help to explain why Masons were often accused, as mentioned earlier, of practicing demonism or black magic.

Furthermore, a lingering cultural memory of the shamanic ecstasies apparently guided Masons' understanding of their own activities. Many Masonic bodies, including the Deputy Grand Royal Arch Chapter and Mount Vernon Lodge in Providence, as well as the lodges in Warren, Bristol, and Chepachet, timed their meetings with the full moon, which both allowed Brethren to travel more easily through unlit streets and echoed the long association of the shamanic Good Society with the moon.[125] In addition, beliefs in fairies, elves, and other folkloric groups of invisible night travelers are holdovers of Eurasian shamanism; in 1796, the *Newport Mercury* reprinted a "glee" sung in a Masonic lodge in London that likened the Masons

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[124] Richard Kieckhefer, review of Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, in *American Historical Review*, June 1992, p. 837-8; Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*, 66-125.

[125] Howard K. DeWolf, "The History of Washington Lodge, No. 3 F and AM, 1796-1955," (Warren, RI, 1955) p. 23; Saint Alban's Lodge No. 6, F. and A. M., Bristol, Rhode Island: *Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary, 1800-1950*, Library of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island, p. 5-9; James V. Greenhalgh, 'Historical Address," *One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary, 1800-1950, Friendship Lodge No. 7, Free and Accepted Masons, Chepachet, Rhode Island*, Library of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island; *Proceedings of the M. E. Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of Rhode Island, from its organization*, 1798-1858 (Central Falls: E. L. Freemason and Co., Book and Job Printers, Union Block, 1880), p. 5-6; Saint Alban's Lodge #6, Log Book, 1800-1850, Saint Alban's Lodge no. 6, Bristol, RI; William Evans Handy, *The Story of Mount Vernon Lodge no. 4 (*Providence: Mount Vernon Lodge, 1924): 17.

to the fairies and elves guarding village greens, concluding with the refrain, "Thus, like elves in mystic ring, / Merry Masons drink and sing."[126]

The foregoing examination of the Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft initiations, with their religious and shamanic elements grafted onto the basic structure of a rite of passage, provides a template for a brief consideration of the third degree, which had developed by about 1720. As discussed in Chapter 1, the third-degree ritual follows the same basic form as the previous two degrees, but involves the candidate playing the role of Hiram Abiff, the architect of Solomon's Temple, who was murdered by lower-level workers, buried, and exhumed. Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* of 1730 describes Hiram as being killed by a blow to the head and buried on "the brow of a hill" in a grave marked with a sprig of "cassia" or acacia. The "Five Points of Fellowship" reportedly originated from the embrace by which the masons lifted the delicate and decaying body from the grave.[127]

Early Masonic documents give hints as to the roots of the Hiram Abiff legend, which further point to themes of death, resurrection, and immortality. By the early 1700s, the Masons were circulating a story concerning a Temple-builder named Hiram who in some way undergoes a process of death and rebirth. The catechism of the Dumfries no. 4 Manuscript, ca. 1710, associates the Master Hiram with metalworking as well as death and revival; the questioner asks, "where layes the master," to which the visitor replies, "in a stone trough under ye west window looking to ye east waiting for the son rising to sett his men to work."[128] The present tense is important, signifying that the Worshipful Master of the lodge, like the sun and like Hiram, in

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[126] *Newport Mercury,* October 11, 1796, p. 4; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 96-109.

[127] Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 20-1; Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 1730.

[128] Dumfries no. 4 Manuscript, Knoop and Jones, *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 60.

some way re-enacts a cycle of death and rebirth, lying in the grave and rising again. By the time of *Jachin and Boaz* Hiram had been identified with the "widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali," a skilled bronze-worker whom Solomon requested to cast metal for the Temple, according to 1 Kings 7. This identification also evokes the widow's son that the prophet Elijah revives from the dead in 1 Kings 17, in the same Biblical book as the reference to Hiram; what is more, Elijah revives the boy by stretching his body out over him, in the same manner that the masons lay themselves over Hiram's body when lifting him from the grave.

The third-degree ritual raises the stakes of fear and wonder over the previous two degrees, and it makes more explicit the stage of ritual death at the heart of the rite of passage. While the initiate is being led through the lodge blindfolded, three Brethren accost him, strike him on the head and chest, and knock him down, after which they narrate the Hiram legend. According to *Jachin and Boaz*, this ritual often inspires such fear or revulsion that the candidate immediately runs out of the lodge; as an alternative, some lodges place a Brother on the floor with his face covered in blood, and then have the candidate take his place. The Brethren teach the candidate the secret word while lifting him from the floor and embracing him—hence the phrasing that one is "raised" a Master.[129]

Attached to the Hiram legend are various symbols and images emphasizing the mysteries' power to overcome mortality. The sprig of acacia placed on Hiram Abiff's temporary grave suggests not only regeneration but immortality; acacia is an exceptionally long-lived plant, and its placement echoes the trees that grow from Adam's grave in the *Golden Legend* and the magical tree on Hiram's tomb alluded to in the letter of Verus Commodus, aside from numerous Eurasian myths of miraculous plants blossoming over the gravesites of sacrifices and borrowing

[129] Jachin and Boaz, 41-3.

their regenerative power.[130] Master Masons customarily used the sprig of acacia as a symbol of life after death; at the first meeting of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island in 1791, the Masons toasted, "May the fragrance of a good report, like a sprig of cassia, bloom over the head of every departed brother," and in 1798, Moriah Lodge in Connecticut gave a eulogy for General Daniel Larned, claiming that Larned "left our lodge to join that of the Supreme Architect… there to flourish, like the ever-verdant Cassia, in immortal bloom."[131] The Master's exhumation, likewise, recalls the common shamanic miracle of revivification that follows from the burial and exhumation of sacrificial bones.[132] Of course, Hiram does not literally resurrect or revive according to the Masonic legend, but this is immaterial to the purpose of the ritual, which is the initiate's communion with the world of the dead. Since the legend explains the Five Points of Fellowship as an imitation of the raising of Hiram from the grave, the final rite of incorporation becomes an embrace of the dead and the living.

Finally, the Master Mason degree's journey into the world of the dead is also a journey toward the divine—which from the shamanic perspective is one and the same. It completes a tri-partite hierarchy, imitating the structure of the Temple. As the first two degrees are the "porch" and the "hall" of the Temple, so the Master's Lodge, the gathering of Master Masons, is called the "sanctum sanctorum," referring to the chamber of the Temple containing the Holy Ark.[133] The inner sanctum can only be glimpsed, however; the journey is always incomplete. The third-

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[130] V. J. Propp, "L'Albero Magico Sulla Tomba," in Propp, *Edipo Alla Luce del Folclore,* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975) p. 3-39, cited in Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 246.

[131] *Providence Gazette*, July 2, 1791, p. 3, Jan. 20, 1798, p. 3.

[132] Ginzburg, 241-9.

[133] William Morgan, *Light on Masonry*, ed. Arturo de Hoyos (Washington, DC: Scottish Rite Research Society, 2008): 81.

degree catechism in *Masonry Dissected* establishes that the quest of Master Masonry is the recovery of the Master's Word that was lost with Hiram's death:

> Q. Where are you a going?
> A. To the West.
> Q. What are you a going to do there?
> A. To look for that which was lost and is now found.
> Q. What was that which was lost and is now found?
> A. The Master-Mason's Word.
> A. How was it lost?
> Q. By Three Great Knocks, or the Death of our Master Hiram.

Later versions of the legend, such as in the catechism of *Jachin and Boaz*, add that Hiram Abiff could not have divulged the word even if he wanted to, since it could only be pronounced by three men together—himself, King Hiram of Tyre, and King Solomon. Clearly, the word, surrounded by taboo and comprising three elements, had magical or divine significance, like the tetragrammaton or other Kabbalistic words. Solomon, in this more detailed version of the legend, tells the masons searching for Hiram that if he is dead then the Master's Word is lost; after finding the Master's body, the workers invent a new word to replace it. The precise word varies among the different catechisms—in *Masonry Dissected* it is given as "machbenah" and in *Jachin and Boaz* as "mahhabone"—but it is this word that Master Masons exchange with one another when embracing in the Five Points of Fellowship.[134]

Masons considered degree rituals to be worth their cost in time, work, and money. The Master Mason degree grew ever more popular over the course of the eighteenth century, and Rhode Island's membership rolls show that by the 1790s hardly any Brothers did not take all three degrees within their first year or two in the Fraternity. In Saint John's Lodge of Providence between 1791 and 1803, when records are most complete, Masons waited an average of 181 days

[134] *Jachin and Boaz*, 41-8.

between taking their Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft degrees, and 148 days between their Fellow Craft and Master Mason degrees. 11% of candidates saved time by taking the second and third degrees together in the same night. Jean Baptiste Tierce, probably a French mariner only sojourning in Providence, took all three degrees on the night of February 28, 1800; at the slow end of the spectrum, Elihu Fish, a farmer from the rural town of Foster, was initiated in Janurary, 1802, passed a Fellow Craft in December of that year, and raised a Master in November, 1803.[135]

The quick integration of the third degree into eighteenth-century Masonry reflects the avid interest in myth and ritual among the Brethren. This same fascination would drive the creation and spread of the higher degrees—the Royal Arch, the Rite of Perfection, and the various degrees that Webb gathered into the York Rite. The mentality of the Masonic impresarios is clear: within every inner sanctum was a further inner sanctum. Rhode Island was an important center of the spread of the higher degrees, with both Moses Michael Hays and Thomas Smith Webb finding fertile ground for their higher-degree projects. We cannot fully explore the form and content of the higher degrees here; rather, I will merely point out that the various higher degrees that developed in the eighteenth century were an elaboration on lines of thought and practice already present in Craft Masonry, not a radical departure. Like the Craft degrees, the higher degrees explore variations on the basic themes of rites of passage. All of them involve the revelation of esoteric knowledge; the Rite of Perfection, as practiced in the eighteenth century, culminates in the Knight of the Sun degree, which involves a long disquisition on alchemy and astrology. The degrees also involve passwords, often in spurious Hebrew, with glosses of their meaning; special signs and symbols, such as moons, stars, birds,

[135] *Special Return* for Saint John's Lodge of Providence; *Providence Gazette*, January 21, 1815, p. 4.

and crowns; and the conferral of ritual clothing that binds the body—sashes, aprons, and rings—as is typical of rites of incorporation.

Most importantly, the Royal Arch degree, the nucleus of all higher-degree systems, continues the quest for the true Master's Word. The ritual ideally takes place in an underground chamber or vault, where the candidate sees a golden triangle with the tetragrammaton and hears the lost word, which is the correct pronunciation of God's true name.[136] The legendary descent into Enoch's vault, where the word is discovered, parallels the movement along the axis joining the cosmic realms—Jacob's ladder, the World Tree, or the Tree of Life; the authors may have taken inspiration from the apocryphal Book of Enoch, which promises that all believers will eat from the Tree of Life. The Royal Arch ritual combines the achievement of the quest of Kabbalah with references to geomancy, Rosicrucianism, and even to Pythagoras; in 1802, Benjamin Gleason asserted that Pythagoras, in formulating his famous theorem, "had the triangle of life in view."[137] For all of its eclectic symbolism, the basic theme of the Royal Arch is the same as that of shamanism: the overcoming of death by communion with the spirit world, which is both the world of the divine and that of the dead. The talent of the creators of the degree was not invention, but encapsulation.

More broadly, the degrees of the Rite of Perfection pursue the Masonic fascination with the cosmic axis uniting the earthly and spiritual realms. The 19th degree, that of Grand Pontiff, asserts that masonry was transmitted from heaven "to replace the antient desctructed temple," and that the "celestial Jerusalem" mentioned in the Book of Revelation was in fact the first

[136] Francken Manuscript 1783, 121-34.

[137] Gleason, 1802, p. 13.

Lodge of Perfection; the tree therein was the Tree of Life.[138] The 21st degree, that of "Prussian Knight," serves to rehabilitate the myth of the Tower of Babel, which though "founded on presumption, vanity, and arrogance," still represents an admirable effort; the tomb of the master builder of the Tower, Phaleg, attests that, "god had forgiven him, as he had repented and become humble."[139] The 24th degree, that of Knights of Kadosh, which mainly teaches the candidate of the destruction of the Knights Templar, shows the initiate a "mysterious ladder" of seven rungs, each of which represents a virtue that the Knight must practice, the ultimate being secrecy.[140] Once again, the symbol evokes Jacob's Ladder, the cosmic axis on which men travel towards the invisible realm, the source of divine knowledge. Our metaphors may become confused or strained—the tower, the tree, the ladder, and the temple, which link the heavens, the underworld, the divine world, the world of the dead, the macrocosm—but the pretension remains the same: the Masons are the conservators of the points of contact between the human world and its sacred counterpart; they are the guardians of the gates.

iv. Other Rituals

Although they were the most important and elaborate, degree rituals were not the only ceremonial rites that Masons observed. Masonic life was punctuated by rituals of various sorts that managed the Brethren's control over sacred space and knowledge, including:

1. Opening of lodge meetings
2. Degree initiations

[138] Francken Manuscript, 220-1.

[139] Francken manuscript, 230-2.

[140] Francken Manuscript, 264, 270-1.