

Freemasonry

The true history of Freemasonry is much in its character like the history of a nation; It has its historic and its prehistoric era. In its historic era, the institution can be regularly traced through various antecedent associations, similar in design and organization, to a comparatively remote period. Its connection with these associations can be rationally established by authentic documents and by other evidence which no historian would reject.

For the prehistoric era that which connects it with the mysteries of the pagan world, and with the old priests of Eleusis, of Samothrace, or of Syria let us honestly say that we no longer treat of Freemasonry under its present organization, which we know did not exist in those days, but of a science peculiar, and peculiar only, to the Mysteries and to Freemasonry, a science which we may call Masonic symbolism, and which constituted the very heart-blood of the ancient and the modern institutions, and gave to them, while presenting a dissimilarity of form, an identity of spirit. In connecting and tracing the germ of Freemasonry in those prehistoric days, although guided by no documents, and no authentic spoken or written narratives on which to rely, we find fossil thoughts embalmed in those ancient intellects precisely like the living ones which crop out in modern Masonry, and which, like the fossil shells and fishes of the old physical formations of the earth, show by their resemblance to living specimens the graduated connection of the past with the present.

Every human institution is subject to great and numerous variations; the different aspects under which they appear, and the principles by which they are governed,

depend on the advance of civilization, the nature of the protecting government, and the peculiar habits and opinions of the members themselves. Before learning was advanced, and when the art of printing was unknown, the discoveries in the arts and sciences must of necessity have been known to but few individuals. The pursuit of science was a secondary matter, and questions of philosophy were solely the prerogative of priest craft. Agriculture was the grand pursuit of life. But architecture soon, in the natural order of things, arose as a science, and human skill was called into play. The triumph of mind over matter was the great feat of the first architects, who were also the first natural philosophers. There is no speculation in the statement that these formed themselves into an association for improvement at an early date; their architectural monuments preceding the authentic records of history, are with us to this day; and tradition informs us that this union of scientific men differed from the Freemasons of to-day in little more than in name. The arts and sciences were cultivated in Egypt and the adjacent countries in Asia, while all other nations were involved in ignorance. Of these sciences, astronomy, geometry and architecture took the first rank.

Freemasonry not only presents the appearance of a speculative science, based on an operative art, but also very significantly exhibits itself as the symbolic expression of a religious idea. In other and plainer words, we see in it the important lesson of eternal life, taught by a legend which, whether true or false, is used in Masonry as a symbol and allegory. But whence came this legend? Did all lineal sources have this legend? The evidence is that they did. Not indeed the same legend; not the same personage as its hero; not the same details; but a legend with the same spirit and

design; a legend funereal in character, celebrating death and resurrection, solemnized in lamentations and terminating in joy.

We can not correctly understand the history of the nations of antiquity, much less their theology, philosophy, science or ethics, without knowledge of their societies. Some of the grandest ideas, those which have had the greatest influence on human progress, were born amid mystic symbols.

Ancient Mysteries.

Among the most important of the Ancient Mysteries were the following: The Osiric in Egypt, the Adonisian in Syria, the Mithraic in Persia, the Cabiric in Thrace, the Druidical among the Celts, the Scandinavian among the Gothic, the Dionysian and Eleusinian in Greece.

Each of the Pagan gods had, beside the public, a secret worship paid him, to which none were admitted but those who had been selected by preparatory ceremonies called initiation. This secret hip was termed the MYSTERIES. And this is supported by Strabo, who says "that it was common, both to the Greeks and the barbarians, to perform their religious ceremonies with the observance of a festival, and that they were sometimes celebrated publicly and sometimes in mysterious privacy." The first of the Mysteries of which we have any account, Warburton says, "were those of Isis and Osiris in Egypt."

Egyptian Mysteries.

Egypt has always been considered the birthplace of the Mysteries. It was there the ceremonies of initiation were first established. It was there that truth was first veiled in allegory, and the dogmas of religion were first imparted under symbolic forms. From Egypt this system of symbols was disseminated through Greece and Rome and other countries of Europe and Asia, giving origin, through many intermediate steps, to that mysterious association which is now represented by the institution of Freemasonry. The favored rank of the Egyptian society was the priests. To them belonged one-third of the lands of the kingdom. They were the holy order in whose hands rested the maintenance of the national religious faith, the conduct of all the ceremonies in the temples, the direction of the sacrifices, the work of education and general culture of the Egyptian. The priesthoods of Egypt constituted a sacred caste, in whom the priestly functions were hereditary. They exercised also an important part in the government of state, and the kings of Egypt were but the first subjects of its priests.

The initiation into the Egyptian Mysteries was of all the systems practiced by the ancients the most severe and impressive. The system had been organized for ages, and the priests, who alone were the teachers of the Mysteries, were educated almost from childhood for that purpose. That "learning of the Egyptians," in which Moses is said to have been so skilled, was all imparted in those Mysteries. Over the entire history of the Land of the Pyramids a veil of mystery is drawn. Its history is a dream, not the promises of the future, but of achievements of the past. Here empire first placed her throne and swayed her scepter. Long before

Greece and Rome and Assyria had been wrapped in their swaddling clothes, Egypt was a man of war and a hero of victory. The stones that reared Athens in splendor, and spoke forth the beautiful conceptions of Phidias and Praxiteles, were unused in the quarries long after the Colossi of Thebes had grown old with years. While Abraham, the father of the faithful, wandered a nomad and lived in tents, a Pharaoh sat on the throne of Egypt, and, but a few years after, the Ishmaelitic merchants led their camels laden with spices, balm and myrrh, commodities only used by rich and cultivated peoples, from Gilead to the Nile. A few years from this and there were standing armies in Egypt, chariots of war, bodies of infantry, and, what is still more surprising, a large body of cavalry. It was in the Egyptian society of Isis and Osiris that this ancient and wonderful civilization had its origin. Here were fashioned and wrought out those ideas that subsequently entered into the very life of the people.

The two central figures of these Mysteries, as well as of Egyptian history, were Isis and Osiris. These, when stripped of their mystic garments and brought down to the level of humanity, appear to have been an early king (Osiris) and queen (Isis) of this country, who were at the same time brother and sister. These, by superior virtue and intelligence, won the admiration and confidence of these wild and untutored barbarians, led them out of their degraded state, and guided their feet into the path of civilization and empire. Under their direction the land of savage darkness became light, and full of joy. Isis taught the people to hold the plow and turn the furrow, and to make bread from the ripened grain. While doing this she made laws for home society, and restrained men from lawlessness and violence by their sanction. Osiris built Thebes, with its

hundred gates; erected temples and altars, instituted the sacred rites, and appointed priests to have the oversight and care of the holy things.

Having accomplished these things, and seeing their effect upon his own people, he resolved to raise a great army, and, leaving Isis as ruler, to go through all the world, "for he hoped he could civilize men and take them off from their rude and beast-like course of life." This he succeeded in doing, but shortly after his return he was slain by his brother Typhon. After his death Isis made a vow never to marry again, and spent her days in ruling justly over her subjects, "excelling all other princes in her acts of grace and bounty towards her own people, and therefore, after her death, she was numbered among the gods, and as such had divine honors and veneration, and was buried at Memphis, where they show her sepulchre at this day in the grove of Vulcan."

The sacred rites which Osiris is said to have instituted received many additions in course -of time, and finally were divided into two degrees. These, as in their copy at Eleusis, Greece, were called the Great and Less, the former being the Mysteries of Osiris, the latter those of Isis, the latter being a preparation to the fuller revelation of the secrets contained in the former.

In the Great Mystery was represented the allegorical history of Osiris, which the Egyptians regarded as the most solemn mystery of their religion, and which Herodotus and all other ancient writers mention with great caution. To be initiated in these was the great privilege of the priest, though this caste were not all admitted indiscriminately to this honor. This was reserved for the heir-apparent to the

throne, and for such priests as excelled in virtue and wisdom.

The principal seat of the Egyptian Mysteries was at Memphis, in the neighborhood of the great Pyramid. The legend was as follows: Osiris, a wise king of Egypt, left the care of his kingdom to his wife Isis, and traveled for three years to communicate to other nations the arts of civilization. During his absence his brother Typhon formed a secret conspiracy to destroy him and to usurp his throne. On his return Osiris was invited by Typhon to an entertainment in the month of November, at which all the conspirators were present. Typhon produced a chest inlaid with gold, and promised to give it to any person whose body would exactly fit it. Osiris was tempted to try the experiment; but he no sooner laid down in the chest than the lid was closed and nailed down and the chest thrown into the river Nile. The chest containing the body of Osiris was, after being for a long time tossed about by the waves, finally cast up at Byblos, in Phoenicia, and left at the foot of a tamarisk tree. Isis, overwhelmed with grief for the loss of her husband, set out on a journey, and traversed the earth in search of the body. After many adventures, she at length discovered the spot whence it had been thrown up by the waves, and returned with it in triumph to Egypt. It was then proclaimed, with the most extravagant demonstrations of joy, that Osiris was risen from the dead and had become a god. Such, with slight variations of details by different writers, are the general outlines of the Osiris legend.

It was represented in the public drama of initiation, by the image of a dead man being borne in an ark or coffin, by a procession of initiates; and this enclosure in the coffin or interment of the body was called the aphanism, or