

The Masonic Ritual

as an Educational Tool

By Aubrey L. Burbank

PGM. Maine

This Short Talk Bulletin was adapted from a thought provoking paper presented at the Seventh Annual Northeast Conference on Masonic Education and Libraries in 1962 by Past Grand Master, Aubrey L. Burbank of Maine.

The subject calls for an appraisal of the place of the Ritual in the program of education, and implies that its future is, in some measure at least, dependent upon its growth and development, past and present. The inference, therefore, is that we begin at the beginning, and that while the intent is to think in terms of the speculative craft, we cannot detach ourselves from antiquity. We must necessarily begin with the operative guild which gave us birth.

Masonic ritual, in the broadest sense, incorporates any and all ceremonies or rites from the opening of the lodge to its closing, including the conferring of degrees. To trace the beginning in either particular would be next to impossible, and it is not our intent to DWELL in the past. We can be reasonably certain, however, that the first speculative lodges inherited their modes and customs from the operative guilds and thus began their existence with a ritual sufficient for their needs – a ritual which probably provided for a ceremony of opening and closing and the administering of an oath of allegiance. This is understandable in view of the fact that medieval lodges opened with prayer, after which each workman had his daily labor assigned him and received the necessary instruction to complete the work in detail. We further learn that in or near that same period, an investiture with Masonic secrets, the building secrets, that is, was, perhaps, originally conferred in one of the abbey rooms near which the Cathedral, or other sacred edifice was being erected, until the superstructure had so far advanced as to cover the church crypt, and offered a safe asylum for the craft to congregate in, for the purpose of working the rites appurtenant to the several Masonic degrees.

With the passing of time, the working tools of the operative craft became the symbols of the speculative, and in order that they might be understood and their significance properly related to

the living of a life acceptable to God and in a more perfect relationship with one another, it became necessary to devise a means of instruction which gave rise to ritualistic form.

As speculative Masonry grew and spread to other parts of the old world and eventually to America, its ritual became further enriched with allegory and symbols to the point where it became an art in itself, but never losing its original purpose and intent – that of imparting knowledge to the initiate.

There have been times in the history of the craft, however, when ritualism became the whole aim and end of Freemasonry. The effects of war, which made its mark upon society and life in general found no exception in the Masonic Fraternity. Lodges became likened to "mills in turning out Masons (or numbers), and the ritual suffered as a result, due partially to haste, and partly to indifference and ineffectiveness on the part of undedicated officers. Then, too, in America, there has been a tendency to lengthen the ritual to accommodate the so-called ritualistic orators, and a further tendency to exploit the ritual, for the amusement of the brethren at the sacrifice of the more important task of imparting knowledge.

In more recent years, through various programs of candidate instruction, with the ritual as the foundation and basis of that instruction, there has been a growing tendency to restore the ritual to its proper place in the total program of Masonic education. Newly-raised Masons today have at their disposal a greater understanding and appreciation of the historically and life-molding significance of the ritual, and the emphasis in rendition is gradually changing from the 'I' dotter and the 'T' crosser to the more meaningful rendition which causes men to think, to feel, and to act.

This is not to condemn good ritualism. The preservation of ritual in its purest form is most important and imperative. Good ritualism is an honor; poor ritualism is always pernicious. Good ritualism is worth the best efforts and highest aspirations of any Master; poor ritualism is unworthy of any Master. Good ritualism is one of the great assets of a lodge and a potent advertising medium; poor ritualism is an efficient hypnotic.

However, our subject does not concern itself with ritualistic rendition, but rather the place of the ritual in an educational program.

We have already indicated the tendency on the part of many Grand Jurisdictions to initiate a program of candidate instruction, and it is our opinion that such instruction cannot divorce itself from the ritual as the basis and foundation of that instruction.

As for its place in the future, it is our feeling that there are unexplored resources in the symbolism and allegory of our ritual commensurate to, and of about equal magnitude with the space age in which we live, resources which will help mankind to better understand his place in the world as a creature of one Almighty Parent, and endowed with powers beyond his most imaginative dreams. If we are to make men, through our ritualistic teachings, better able to deal with the problems of life in their relations toward the Supreme Architect of the Universe and

their fellowman which is our major task in the building of spiritual temples, then we must utilize the resources at hand.

To say that we have exhausted this field would be preposterous and indicative of Masonic ignorance, because, as any one of you sufficiently versed in Masonry very well know, there is no end to the great well of information which lies buried in the antiquity of our Order. The potential in space is limitless – so also is the potential in Masonic research.

Some of these are so obvious that we hesitate to call them to your attention. WHY CAME YOU HERE? To seek Good that makes us Men, and the love that makes us Brothers. WHAT CAME YOU HERE TO DO? To discover myself, and how to rule and use the strange powers within my nature, that the Rough Ashlar of Youth might be wrought into the Perfect Ashlar of Manhood. WHAT DO YOU MOST DESIRE? To walk in the light, to know the Truth, to live in the glory of an illumined world, to ascend the Winding Stair of knowledge, to enter the Court of the Temple of Imagery where the symbols of God hallow our mortal life. BY WHAT RIGHT OR BENEFIT? By the Right of a man to know the meaning of life, so brief at its longest, so broken at its best; and by the benefit of a need too deep for tears. WORDS? Yes. But meaningful words that can be read into our symbolism and allegory.

And what of the even more obvious teachings left unexplored in our Ritual? The search for the Lost Word – the Rite of Destitution – The Altar – The Great Lights, and the Lesser Lights – the letter "G" – the Hiramic Legend. We could go on and on, illustrating where we have but scratched the surface in our program of education. But, behind, before and underneath it all lies the ritual, so rich and abundant in life-building, and soul-building resources as to defy the most searching and scholarly mind.

What of the place of the ritual in any program of education? It is, as always, past, present and future, the foundation stone upon which we not only MUST build, but through the grace of an Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent God, we are so privileged as men and as Masons.

STB - December 1982