

The Three Scripture Readings

Unknown

In almost all of the Jurisdictions of the United States the Volume of the Sacred Law is open at the 133rd Psalm in the First Degree, at the Seventh Chapter of Amos in the second degree and at the Twelfth Chapter of Ecclesiastes in the third degree.

British Freemasons open their Bible in the first degree at Ruth iv:7: “Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor; and this was the testimony in Israel.”

In the second degree, the English use Judges xii:6:

“Then said they unto him, Say Now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan; and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.”

In the third degree the Masons of the British Jurisdiction open the Bible at I Kings vii:13-14:

And King Solomon sent forth and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a Widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass; and he was filled with wisdom, and understanding, and came to King Solomon, and wrought all his work.”

Various other passages have been used at different times; the account of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac in the first degree; I Kings vi:8, and again at II Chronicles iii:17 in the second degree; and Amos v:25,26 and II Chronicles vi:14,15 (the prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple) during the third degree.

Whether any of these passages are more appropriate than those almost universally in use in this country is a matter of opinion. Ours have to us the sanctity of long use, the sacredness of the familiar, and he would be a bold man indeed, who would try to change them. Alas, many who would fight vigorously for their retention understand them not; the grasshopper and the almond tree, the plumb line of the Lord and dew of Herman are still sealed mysteries to many Masons, although their interpretation is as beautiful as it is simple.

The 133rd Psalm used in an Entered Apprentice's lodge reads as follows:

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord Commanded the Blessing, even life for evermore.”

Unity is an essential in a Masonic Lodge; unity of thought, of intention and of execution. It is but another word for harmony, which Freemasons are taught “is the strength and support of all well regulated institutions, especially this of ours.” Dew is nature’s blessing where rain is little in quantity, and the dew of Hermon is proverbially heavy. Israel poured precious ointments on the heads of those people honored; that which “went down to skirts of his garments” was evidently great in quantity, significant of the honor paid to Aaron, personification of the high priesthood, representative of the solidity of his group. The whole passage is a glorification of the beauty of brotherly love, which is why it is a part of the entered Apprentice’s Degree, in which the initiate is first introduced to that principle tenet of the Fraternity.

“Thus he shewed me; and, behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, Amos, what seest thou” And I said, a Plumline. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumline in the midst of my people Israel; I will not again pass by them any more.” (Amos vii:7,8)

The vital and important part is that the Lord set a plumline “in the midst of his people Israel.” He did not propose to judge them by a plumline afar off, in another land, in high Heaven, but here – here “in the midst” of them.

This is of intense interest to the Fellowcraft Mason, since it teaches him how he should judge his own work – and, more important, how he should judge the work of others.

Presumably plumlines hang alike. Presumably, all Plumbs, like all Squares and all Levels, are equally accurate. Yet a man may use a tool, thinking it accurate, which to another is not true. If the tools of building and the tools of judging be not alike, either the judgment must inaccurate, or the judgment should take into consideration the tool by which the work was done.

By the touch system a blind man may learn to write upon a typewriter. If a loosened type drops from the type bar when the blind man strikes the letter “e” he will make but a little black smudge upon the paper. It would not be reasonable to criticize the blind man for imperfect work as he has no means of knowing that his tool was faulty. If the smudges which stand for the letter “e” are all in the right places, then it is obvious that in spite of his handicap the blind man has perfectly operated his machine. This is a judgment by a plumline “in the midst” of the man and his work. If, however, the paper with the smudged letters “e” was examined by one who knew nothing of the workman’s blindness or nothing of his typewriter, doubtless he would judge it as imperfect.

The builders of the Washington Monument and the Eiffel Tower in Paris both used plumlines accurate to the level of the latitude on which these structures stand. Both are at right angles with

sea level. Yet, to some observer on the moon, equipped with a strong telescope, these towers would not appear parallel. As they are in different latitudes they rise from the surface of the earth at an angle to each other.

Doubtless he who engineered the Monument would protest that the Memorial to Washington was right and the French Engineer's Tower wrong. Knowing his plumbline was accurate, the Frenchman would believe the monument crooked. But the Great Architect, we may hope, would think both right, knowing each was perfect by the plumb by which it was erected. Thus the lesson from Amos is that we are to judge our work by our own plumbines, not by another's; if we erect that which is good work, true work, square work by our own working tools – in other words, by our own standard – we will do well. Only when a Fellowcraft is false to his own conscience is he building other than fair and straight.

Of all the quotations, allusions, facts and names from the Great Light which are a part of the Masonic ritual, none has a more secure place in the hearts of the brethren than the first seven verses from Ecclesiastes xii.

Of the two favorite interpretations of Biblical commentators, one makes this dramatic passage a description of old age and senile decay; the other a reference to the seldom experienced and much feared thunder storm in Palestine.

The physical interpretation may be most easily considered verse by verse:

1. "Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them".
2. "While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:"

The darkening of light and luminaries refer to coming blindness or extreme near-sightedness, and the clouds which return after the rain to a continuation of poor sight, even after much weeping.

3. "In the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened."

The keepers of the house are the hands which tremble with palsy in old age. The strong men are the legs which become bowed with the years. The grinders which cease because they are few are the teeth, and those that look out of the windows is a poetic expression for sight.

4. "And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;"

The doors are the ears which grow deaf in age and can no longer hear the sound of the grinding of grain in the little stone mills which the women use. To rise up at the voice of a bird may signify the light sleep of age easily interrupted by any slight sound, or nervousness which is so extreme in some old men that they start at any little noise. The daughters of music are the vocal cords which lose their timber in age, resulting in the cracked voice of senility.

5. “Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:”

The old man fears any height, knowing his brittle bones will stand no fall. He is timid, and he has no strength with which to defend himself. The almond tree blossoms white, like an old man’s hair. Any little weight, even a grasshopper, is too much a burden for extreme age to carry. The old have no desires. The long home is the grave, in preparation for which the mourners go about the streets.

6. “Or ever the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain or the wheel broken at the cistern.”

The silver cord is the spinal cord. The golden bowl is the brain, the pitcher broken at the fountain a failing heart, and the wheel broken at the cistern the kidneys, bladder and prostate gland, all of which give trouble to an old man.

7. “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

Whether or not the writer possessed a sufficient knowledge of anatomy to symbolize parts of the body as the “silver cord” the “golden bowl” the “pitcher”, the “wheel broken at the cistern” is so problematical that much skepticism of this interpretation has been expressed. The people of Israel were nomads, tillers of the soil, vinyardists, tenders of flocks. Their wisdom was of the spiritual rather than the material. That they had dissected dead bodies enough to gather the relationship between its parts is not impossible as animal sacrifices were so common. But the imagery seems to be rooted in too high a degree of scientific knowledge to be wholly credible. The storm interpretation is not open to this objection, and certainly it is far more in keeping with the magnificent poetry of the words.

Think of a windy day, with clouds and rain; towards evening it begins to clear, and the heavens turn black again as the “clouds return after the rain.” This was a signal for caution if not for terror in Palestine. Men and women and children feared the thunder storm, probably because it came so seldom. Doors were shut in the streets. The strong guards who stood before the houses of the wealthy were afraid, and trembled, for they might not leave their places. The little mills with which the women ground grain eventide ceased; few would remain at their tasks in the face of the storm. Women in upper rooms drew back into the dark. Those outdoors became nervous; no one sang; the black thunderheads flourished their white tops like the almond tree;

everyone feared the lightening and the thunder which was on high; even a little weight which kept a man from running to shelter was a burden.

Here the admonition is to remember the Creator before the terror of death, which is worse than the terror of the storm. The rich man with his golden water bowl hung on a silver chain must fear it. The poor man with his earthen pitcher who must send his women to the well for water is in terror. Even the man strong and rough as the crude wooden wheel which drew the skin bucket to the top of the well shook with fear. Death is the same for all, and feared alike by all.

Such an interpretation almost equals the poetry of expression. But read it how we will, the majestic awe-inspiring poetry rings home the solemn warning with a shake of the head and a shiver up the spine... Remember “now” thy Creator – “now,” before the fearsome storms of life. or the decay of old age are upon you; wait not until “fears are in the way” to cry for help to the Almighty. Delay not until toothless, sightless, white haired age asks for help from on high because there is no help left on earth! Remember “now” thy Creator, while limbs are strong and desire ardent, while life pulses readily and the world is all before –.

Such is the intention of these ringing sentences, and such do they mean to Freemasonry. Every Master Mason learns so that he can never forget, when he who had received the benefit of lodge prayer had now to pray for himself. He who had been taught to fear not while in the hands of his brethren, stands at last, in allegory, in danger and alone.

No man thinks of his Master Mason’s degree but hears again in his heart at least the beginning and ending of this sermon in poetry. “Remember now thy Creator, in the days of thy youth – then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” The solemn strokes on the bell which is Ecclesiastes and the soul-gripping drama of the legend of Hiram Abif are never to be known apart by him who met them together.

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