

# Masonry - An Aid or Hindrance to Light?

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Since becoming a Mason, I have heard several different interpretations or definitions given to the concept of "Masonic Light," most, if not all, which were rather vague and nebulous at best. Often it seems as though the term is used to mean little more than simply knowledge, intellect, or wisdom, as those terms are commonly understood. Such a definition of the term brings to mind the old cartoons in which a light bulb would appear above the head of a cartoon character that had just had what he believed to be a great idea, as though he had just "seen the light." Surely a concept so central to the ideals of the Masonic fraternity and its members must mean more than this, and the lack of a clearly recognized definition with a higher meaning is somewhat frustrating. However, I do not believe that I am alone in this frustration. In the Introduction to Pike's Lecture On Masonic Symbolism it is written that:

"Within the Symbolic Lodge, the Candidate is instructed to say that he is seeking 'more light,' and upon that basis he is admitted. Yet, the moral instruction he is given is only that which he must already have to be fit for admission in the first place. Many symbols are displayed, but the explanations are trivial and misleading; many are left unexplained. [See Symbolism of the Blue Degrees of Freemasonry: Albert Pike's "Esoterika," (Arturo deHoyos, trans. & ed.), SRRS, 2005 for his extended argument of these points]. He is not told what he must do in order to obtain that which he claimed to seek and was not given." 1

Therefore, before proceeding further to determine whether Masonry aids or hinders one's search for light, it is necessary to determine what light it is for which we as Masons are to search.

In order to answer this question, this paper will make reference to certain lectures of Albert Pike, noted Mason, Masonic scholar, and writer. However, for readers who may be unfamiliar with Pike's works, I should first note the following, as stated in the Introduction to Pike's A Second Lecture On Symbolism:

"Pike is suggesting in this Lecture, as he did in the First Lecture, that many of the concepts taught in Freemasonry, though extracted from Christianity and Judaism, actually have their roots in the ancient East. Thus, we may say that Pike's intent is educational - both in regard to the symbolism and ideas of Freemasonry and, by extension, the essential theology of the religions of Europe and the Middle East." 2

Indeed, in the Second Lecture, Pike states that:

"We owe to [Vedic literature] and the Zend-Avesta, and not to the Hebrew Books, all our philosophical ideas about God, the immortality of the soul, and the Trinity and the doctrines taught by St. John and St. Paul.

And Masonry owes to them her symbols and the doctrines of which these are the symbols; as I have explained in the Lecture on Symbolism, which this is intended to complete." 3

It is not the intent of this paper to either confirm or refute Pike's foregoing thesis; indeed, to attempt to do either would necessitate a paper of far greater length and breadth than this brief exercise and frankly, would require research far more extensive than your humble author is willing (or most likely able) to undertake. However, if for no reason other than ease of understanding, most references herein to Pike's lectures will be to passages from Christian or Jewish sources, rather than from ancient Eastern religions.

In his Lecture On Masonic Symbolism, Pike wrote that:

". . . in the Hebrew Scriptures we find, God came from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and His brightness was as the Light [Hab. 3:3] ... And the Light dwelleth with Him [Dan. 2:22] ... out of Zion the perfection of beauty God hath shined [Ps. 50:2] ... The Lord is my light and my salvation [Ps. 27:1] ... He shone forth from Mount Paran [Deut. 33:2(KJV)] he shined forth from ... and in the Psalms: The Lord is my light [Ps. 27:1] ... Light is sown for the righteous [Ps. 97:11] ... For with thee is the fountain of life; in the light we shall see light [Ps. 36:9(KJV)] in thy light shall we see light. And so in the Gospel according to Saint John it is said, In it (the Word) [footnote omitted] was life, and the life was the light of men [Jn. 1:4 (KJV)]. In him was life ... He was not the light, but came to bear witness of the light. The true light was that which lighteth every man that cometh into the world [Jn. 1:8-9] ... It was in the world, and the world was made by its intermediation [Jn. 1:10(KJV)] He was in the world, and the world was made by him. ... and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not confine it [Jn. 1:5]. And, finally, in the Creed [That is, the Nicene Creed], the very doctrine of Zarathustra is pronounced; Christ being termed Light of Light, Very God of Very God.

...

In the Hebrew Kabbalah, God is the essential, eternal, unlimited light, filling all space. When He was minded to create, He withdrew Himself on all sides from a point, thus forming a circular space into which He immitted [sic] the letter yod; and this is the point in the centre of a circle [footnote omitted].

In the Decree of the Sacred and Holy Synod of Trent [This is the famous Council of Trent (1545-1563)]."

The point Pike is making is that this Council reaffirmed the Nicene Creed on 4 Feb 1546.], of January, 1546, are quoted the words of the Apostle James that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights; and it termed Jesus Christ the true light." 4

Pike's A Second Lecture On Symbolism is to very similar effect.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Pike noted that:

"John the Baptizer came to bear witness of the Light, of the true Light, that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Christ, Paul says to Timothy, alone has immortality, dwelling in the light unto which no man can approach. The Lord, he says to the Thessalonians, will consume the wicked with the breath of His mouth, and destroy them with the brightness of His coming. God is Light, says John, in his first epistle, and in Him is no darkness at all." 6

Annotation 1 of the Conclusion section of the transcribed and annotated edition of Pike's A Second Lecture On Symbolism sums Pike's point up nicely (including Pike's extensive foray into the writings of ancient Eastern religions which this paper has not addressed) as follows: ". . . In spite of the several errors that these notes have cataloged, and most of them from faulted sources, Pike's essential point is worth the effort. The perception of God as light reaches back to the earliest history of man ..."7

If God is the Light which we as Masons are to seek, how is Masonry to aid us in our search? Is Masonry to give us that Light, or to merely give us direction as to where we may find that Light? I would suggest the answer is the latter; however, as discussed further below, I would also suggest that modern Masonry's efficacy at even giving direction as to where the Light may be found may be questioned.

Over twenty years ago, The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council of the World, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A. published a pamphlet titled Freemasonry And Religion. In it, several articles providing the perspectives of several men who were both Masons and "men of the Cloth" were presented, portions of which I believe to be relevant to the topic being addressed herein.<sup>8</sup>

For example, the Reverend Dr. W. Kenneth Lyons, Jr., 32°, K.C.C.H., wrote that:

"... Much of the ritual of our Fraternity does in fact come from Old and New Testament Scriptures. It is the most solemn of all responsibilities to administer God's Word. It is also believed by most theologians that in Old and New Testament Scriptures the Jewish and Christian communities are stated as the primary caretakers of the faith. Masonry has indeed recognized this great Scriptural resource and incorporated a belief in a Supreme Being as its foundation. Masonry, however, is not the primary caretaker of the faith but a respector of faith practice.

Practicing faith in one's God is appropriately ritualized and sacramentalized in the synagogue, church, mosque, etc. The major part of the lives we exhibit, as God-believing Masons, should be learned within these houses of worship. Regular attendance at Lodge is no faith substitute for regular attendance at church or synagogue." 9 (Emphasis added)

Similarly, Dr. James P. Wesberry, 32°, K.C.C.H., wrote that:

It is no secret that many of Masonry's noblest and beautiful teachings are from both the Old and New Testaments. It is no secret that the Bible holds the central position as the great light of Masonry. It is no secret that Masons love and revere the Bible nor is it a secret that Masonry helped to preserve it in the darkest age of the church when infidelity sought to destroy it. The Bible meets Masons with its sacred message at every step of progress in its various degrees. . . .

Where in all the annals of time is such an organization to be found outside of the church? Yet it is no secret that Masonry is not a religion, nor a church. A good Mason keeps his priorities in order. Masonry respects every man's right to the religion of his choice and never claims or desires to be any man's religion or a substitute for it. Masons believe in tolerance. Masonry helps and encourages a man to be a better church member, and a good church member usually makes a good Mason. Some of the most religious persons I have ever known have been Masons. For any person to allow Masonry to become his religion or to take the place of his church is a mistake and not due to Masonic teaching but to someone's misinterpretation or misunderstanding.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis added)

Finally, Bishop Carl J. Sanders, 32°, K.C.C.H., (of the United Methodist Church), stated that:

Let me quickly and emphatically say that Freemasonry is not and has never been a religion; however, Freemasonry has always been a friend and ally of religion. . . .

Freemasonry has never asked me to choose between my Lodge and my Church. Masonry has never and will never usurp the place of God. Never has anyone dared to say: "Thou shalt love Masonry with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

There can be only one ultimate loyalty, and the Living God is the only worthy object of such loyalty.

Possibly there are those who have made a god out of Masonry. You can make a god out of anything - your business, your labor union, your civic club, your Lodge, and even your Church. You can even make a god out of left-overs (Isaiah 44).

My Masonic activities have never interfered with my loyalty to and my love for my Church. Quite to the contrary, my loyalty to my Church has been strengthened by my Masonic ties. Good Masons are good Churchmen.<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis added)

How then, does 21st Century Masonry aid us in our Bible study, or encourage our regular church attendance or encourage us to be better church members? At first blush the answer would appear to be by offering a veritable multitude of Masonic organizations to which we may belong and devote what precious little time we have, each with their own meetings and related commitments, until we have no time left for those loftier endeavors to which Masonry is supposed to direct us. Aside from time devoted to Symbolic Lodge, Royal Arch Chapter, Council, Commandery, Scottish Rite, York Rite College, Knight Masons, Shrine, and the Allied Masonic Degrees (to name only Masonic organizations of which I am personally a member), what "quality time" is left for in-depth study of scripture? Other than on Sunday mornings, a time and day when Masonic organizations finally learned not to schedule meetings, when can one attend classes or other meetings at church, when the calendar seems full of Masonic meetings and obligations? In fact, I have personally had scheduling conflicts between classes held at church and various Masonic meetings on more than one occasion. It seems then that at times, we are asked to choose between faithful attendance at Masonic functions and faithful church attendance and scriptural pursuits; that, rather than being an "aid to Light," Masonry, in its multitudinous incarnations stands instead as a hindrance to, or at least a distraction from, the attainment of true light. The cynic might even argue that the purpose behind the creation of many Masonic bodies had nothing to do with the noble purpose of further assisting members in their search for Light, but that such bodies were created for far less noble purposes.

However, before blaming Masonry for taking all our time by providing so many different opportunities in order to assuage our own consciences, I suggest we first take a look at ourselves. After all, we are, are we not free willed, free thinking adults responsible for our own actions? As suggested above, I am certainly not free from the criticism that I belong to too many Masonic organizations or that I spend too much time on Masonic activities, and I suspect that the same is true of many of you. However upon reflection, I can honestly say that I have never been forced to join a Masonic organization or to attend a Masonic function.

What we are dealing with here is a matter of priorities, and as stated by Dr. Wesberry, "A good Mason keeps his priorities in order."<sup>12</sup> We should each take the time to attend our chosen house of worship and study the scriptures, not only on Sunday morning but during the week as well. I would suggest that the foregoing statement is true separate and apart from Masonry, but it should be particularly true to a Mason. If you find that Masonic activities are conflicting with or even substituting for regular church attendance, don't blame Masonry for offering too many organizations; check your priorities and reprioritize if necessary. As stated by Dr. Lyons, regular attendance at lodge is no substitute for regular attendance at church,<sup>13</sup> and to quote Bishop Sanders, "Masonry has never and will never usurp the place of God."<sup>14</sup> If we allow Masonry to do so in our own lives, we have only ourselves to blame as this is not the purpose of Masonry. If you have a conflict between a function at your lodge and a function at your church, it is up to you to decide which to attend. Masonry does not choose for you; rather, the choice is

yours. If the GPS device in your car directed you to drive off a bridge which was only partially completed, would you choose to do so? Again, the choice is yours.

Masonry exists to aid us in our search for light, to give us guidance and direction as to where we may find the light, not to be or substitute for the light and not to demand that we devote every waking hour to purely Masonic pursuits. As long as we keep it in its proper perspective and keep our own priorities in order, I submit that it can still, even in the hectic, frenzied pace of the 21st Century, fulfill its rightful purpose as an aid to us, its members, in our search for light, but it cannot substitute for the light. Only we can permit it to become a hindrance rather than an aid in our search for that light through our own actions, poor choices, and misplaced priorities.

#### End Notes

1 Albert Pike's Lecture On Masonic Symbolism and A Second Lecture On Symbolism: The Amkara And Other Ineffable Words, I.ii & n. 1 (R. Hutchens trans. & annot., SRRS 2006).

2 Id. at II.iii

3 Id. at II.35

4 Id. at I.42-43 & nn. 139-146, 148-152 & 156

5 See id. at II.96-99

6 Id. at II.98-99

7 Id. at II.169 n. 1

8 The articles were originally printed in The New Age magazine, and reprinted in the pamphlet. See Some Words of Introduction, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987).

9 Lyons, Freemasonry and Religion, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987).

10 Wesberry, It Is No Secret!, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987)

11 Sanders, A Mason Without Apology, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987)

12 Wesberry, It Is No Secret!, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987)

13 Lyons, Freemasonry and Religion, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987)

14 Sanders, A Mason Without Apology, in The Supreme Council, 33°, Mother Council Of The World Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite Of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., Freemasonry And Religion (May 1987)

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