

ANNUAL ORATION

Whence Comes Masonry?

What Is Masonry?

The Mission of Masonry



Delivered

By L. E. THOMAS,

Past Grand Master,

At the

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by whose authority this Address is printed.

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ORATION.

*Most Worshipful Grand Master and Brethren of the M. W. Grand Lodge,
State of Louisiana:*

Some years ago when I introduced a resolution in the Grand Lodge for the annual appointment of a Grand Orator, whose duty it should be to deliver a prepared address at each session of the Grand Lodge, it was not done with the view of falling victim of my own resolution. Its object and purpose was, that on these special occasions when there should be a representative attendance from the Constituent Lodges of the State, that a propitious time was at hand when something should be said for the edification and profit of the Craft.

I desire to tender my thanks to the Grand Master for the distinguished honor, and to assure you that I sincerely hope that I may be able to say something in harmony with the spirit of the resolution.

I once heard of a preacher who selected for his text that verse from the first epistle of Peter, as follows: "The devil goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." The preacher said: "My brethren, the foregoing text naturally divides itself into the following subdivisions: "Where the devil did he come from; who the devil he is; where the devil is he going to, and what the devil is he roaring about."

Now I shall not make this precise classification of my subject, but shall treat of the topic of Free Masonry under the following subdivisions:

Whence comes Masonry? What is Masonry? What is the mission of Masonry?

WHENCE COMES MASONRY?

If I was able to answer the proposition whence comes this venerable institution, I am sure you would set me down as one of the most erudite scholars of the age. I have given much thought and study to this important topic, and am firmly convinced that no man can with absolute certainty point his finger to the time or place when its principles were first propagated among the children of men.

Some historians claim it is coeval with society, that ever since the morning stars sang together, and the bright Aurora faded into the brilliant splendor of the first day, and the great Creator with omnipotent power said, "Let there be light," this Order has been in existence.

We have various theories advanced by learned historians which might be interesting to fully consider.

What is known as the written history of our Order as a speculative society dates back to the re-organization about the year 1717; but we have many historical legends such as the Halliwell manuscript published some time during the early part of the fourteenth century, which claims that the "Grand Lodge of York" was founded in England about the year 936, during the reign of King Athelstan, and that his son, young King Edwin, was also one of the first Grand Masters, and that Alfred the Great was a patron of this grand institution. What is known as the pre-historic period of the institution is lost in antiquity, and, as already stated, we have only various theories advanced concerning its origin.

Dr. Anderson, a very scholarly Mason of the eighteenth century, attributes a knowledge of the art to Adam and his sons. He claims that Noah and his three sons were also Masons, and he then traces it through Shem and Abraham, and on down through the Hebrew nation to Solomon. He further claims that the Emperor Augustus was a Grand Master of Rome, and established the Augustan System of Architecture. He accepts what is known as the York legend of the establishing the Order during the tenth century.

Dr. Preston, another writer on Masonic history, in dealing with the pre-historic period of our Order, contends that Masonry was introduced into England during the conquest of Julius Caesar, who he claims was a protector of the Craft.

Dr. William Hutchinson, another learned writer, has the most peculiar views of any of our historians, as he holds to the view that Masonry was never an operative society, but was a speculative institution for philosophic and religious purposes. He even undertakes to say that the work on the Temple of Solomon was only incidental, and that the principles and teachings of our Order existed long anterior thereto.

He claims that Masonry was first taught by Adam to his descendants, and continued through the patriarchal age. His next idea is that it was enlarged by Moses, and confirmed by Solomon, and thus lasted until the era of Christ. To its expanded code of ethics he says there was added a number of symbols derived from the Egyptian Mysteries by Moses. He then contends that the third stage of Masonry followed the teachings of Christ, and that Masonry existed in three forms, known as the "Patriarchal," the "Jewish," and the "Christian," and that it has continued in the last form until the present day and that the Druids became worshippers of Christianity and introduced the Order into England.

His theories, however, are not accepted by any other writer, nor are they supported by history.

Dr. Oliver, another very erudite Mason who has written many books upon the Order, and who was a learned clergyman of the Church of England, has given us a very profound dissertation upon this very impor-

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tant topic. In his work on the antiquity of Free Masonry, he claims that while in the Garden of Eden Adam was taught that science, and that in the course of time he communicated the secret to his children. He then sets forth the theory that Seth and his descendants preserved and cultivated the principles of the Order, and that Lamech and his sons were also Masters of the Order. He divides the Institution into Operative and Speculative Masonry, and believes that the descendants of Cain followed the former, and erected many cities during the ante-diluvian period. He holds to the theory that the Speculative stream of Free Masonry flowed on uninterruptedly to the time of Noah, and that this same stream of pure Free Masonry was continued by Shem, while Ham and Japheth, having traversed into Africa and Europe, their descendants became idolaters and lost the true principle of the Order and the worship of the one true God. For this reason he denominates the Egyptian Mysteries and all other societies of a similar character as "spurious" Free Masonry, as they do not embody the worship of the true God. He says that Shem communicated the secret of Masonry to Abraham, through whose descendants they were transmitted to Moses; that they suffered a decay during the captivity in Egypt, but the Institution was revived in the wilderness by Moses, and he further claims that the workmen of Tyre, under Hiram, belonged to the spurious Order, and that the two classes, Jews and Tyrians, were united by King Solomon, who re-organized the society as it now exists.

He agrees with Dr. Hutchinsohn that the Order was largely Christian in its character since its introduction into England. There are some other historians who believe that the Order was instituted at the building of King Solomon's Temple, and that it did not precede the erection of that temple as an institution. Some trace its origin to what is known as the "Eleusinian" mysteries, as well as to many of the other secret organizations that lived in the remote past.

There is indeed something remarkable about the teachings of these secret societies which have been in existence for thousands of years, and that is the fact that almost without exception they tend to teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and they also teach the doctrine of the temporary success of the cause of evil over good, but conclude with the ultimate triumph of the principle Good.

The analogy existing between Free Masonry and other institutions is remarkable in every respect. However, it is sufficient to know that there has been no period in the world's history, however dark, in which some rays of this doctrine have not been thrown upon the general gloom.

The belief in a future life and an immortal destiny have been so inseparably connected with all these Orders that the deep and reverent thinkers of all ages have necessarily submitted to its truth.

It has inspired the verse of the poets and prompted the discussions of philosophers.

Philosophers like Socrates and Plato nourished with earnest longing

the hope of immortality. Cato in his soliloquy said: "Plato thou reasonest well, else why this pleasing hope, this fond desire, this longing after immortality?"

As already stated, the analogy between Masonry and these ancient mysteries is remarkable. There are indeed many points of resemblance, such as the use of symbols, the dramatic form of initiation, advancement by degrees, and the adoption by both of secret means of recognition. These analogies, it must be admitted, are very striking as well as very singular. Take the Egyptian Mysteries, that existed one thousand years before the Christian era, and the struggle of Isis and Osiris in their contest with Typhon, the "God of Evil," is very similar in many of its lessons to that of our Third Degree.

It is said that when the Egyptian obelisk, known as "Cleopatra's Needle," was removed and transported to Central Park, New York, there was found in its base many emblems and symbols that only Masons and those learned in our art could understand. All of this goes to teach us that the Institution is indeed old. But, my Brothers, Masonry is not grand because she is old, but she is old because she is grand!

If it had not been founded on a philosophic basis, it could not have existed through all the trials and vicissitudes it has undergone down to this day. We do not know whence it came into being; but from the garnered truths by it let fall upon the fallow ground of ages gone, have grown the mighty facts of science and religion that will live through all the ages yet to be. This naturally leads us to the second subdivision of our subject:

WHAT IS MASONRY?

This question should probably be answered first negatively. It is not an insurance society or association, without disparaging or underrating the benefits of insurance. She has a nobler, greater end to accomplish! She is that Imperial Institution that carries lessons of true manhood, devotion to women, loyalty to country, into every hamlet within our border; she is that permanent Institution, whose example has actually called into being almost every other benevolent order which exists to-day; she is that imperishable Institution, which takes by the hand the brother who has fallen in the battle of life, that kindly raises him to his feet again and gently brushes from his brow the dust of defeat and encourages him to go forth again to the conflict with renewed strength, furnishing him the determination to accomplish something in life. She is that remarkable Institution which by her tenets and cardinal virtues draws unbidden to her Sanctum Sanctorum the high, the low, the rich and the poor, and numbers them all alike her own pledged sons and workmen. She is that Imperial Institution which by her sterling principles and inspiring faith and noble deeds challenges the admiration of all men.

Masonry is not a club organized simply for the promotion of goodwill, fellowship and the encouragement of revelry and things of that kind.

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Masonry is not a religion, although it is so far interwoven with religion that it lays us under obligation to pay that rational homage to the Deity which at once constitutes our duty and our happiness. She is indeed the handmaiden of the Church, at the same time she teaches each one of us to be one who is

“Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
But looks through Nature up to Nature's God;
Pursues that chain which links the immense design,
Joins heaven and earth, and mortal and divine,
Sees that no being any bliss can know,
But touches some above and some below,
Learns from this union of the rising whole,
The first, last purpose of the human soul,
And knows where faith, law, morals, all began,
All end in love to God and love to man.”

Masonry is a scientific, moral institution that teaches its lessons by symbolism and allegory. There is scarcely a single object in Nature from which it does not draw some moral truth and apply it to our everyday life. Originally we know that it was an operative society by which men were taught the principles of architecture, whereas now we teach the duty “of acting on the square, keeping a tongue of good report, maintaining secrecy and practicing charity.” Masonry is a moral principle, working through an organization of Lodges, and whose teachings are “Peace on earth, good will to men.” It is a combination in one Order of three sovereigns: Of right over force, of intelligence over prejudice, of brotherhood over selfhood.

It presents objects heroic in the highest degree, and which can only serve to inspire Masons, the true builders of the eternal truth, with a resolution as omnipotent as are the obstacles to the upbuilding of all things mightier than men.

What matters it to us here whether this Order of the Square, the Level and the Plumb comes from the Syrians or the Chaldeans, or the Egyptian priests, or from the Hebrew land of Kings and Prophets, or from Grecian Academy, or from the Roman College Fabricum. I care not whether the mysterious pyramids still testify of its eternity, for you know and I know that this, our faith, is a sublime and practical moral force, and this force is the parent of all other earthly forces.

Physical man, like his physical work, is ephemeral and will pass away. Even the beautiful Temple of Solomon, which was so spacious and magnificent in all its proportions, and was so beautifully adorned with gold and silver of that glorious age, has long since crumbled into dust. The beautiful Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, now exist only as a memory.

Many of the other beautiful temples of antiquity have also perished.

and probably what were once the sands of the desert now cover them. But the beautiful lessons received from the instructive tongue, by the attentive ear, have been lodged in the repository of faithful breasts, and the music that fell from the lips of Hiram, the Builder, still lingers on the lips of thousands until this day. Like a beautiful stream rippling over the rocks and crags of superstition and prejudice, this Order of ours has flowed down through the ages, bringing gladness and hope, while it sings ever and anon the same sweet song of devotion and untiring love to humanity.

I once had the pleasure of standing on Pike's Peak in the early dawn and witnessing a glorious sunrise. I looked down into the valley and into the darkness below, and then turned my eyes to the wondrous horizon and saw the great luminary of nature slowly ascend, while down the mountain side I could see the shadows of darkness flee, and I thought of this great Institution of ours.

In the dawn of humanity this mystic Order arose among the nations of the earth, and has driven away the darkness of superstition and flooded the earth with the enlightened knowledge of right and truth everlasting.

The dark clouds of ignorance, passion and prejudice have sought to deluge us, but by the aid of that blessed Ark, "Trust in God," we have been brought down to this good day.

This Institution is no artificial idol of a departed age, no ineffectual bauble born in superstitious darkness and religious dismay, no pretentious relic of despair born in the captivity and dragged forth from the ruins of the dark ages. No; it is the happy reverse of all this. It is the embodiment of all that would be perfect in the spirit and aspirations of man. It is an Institution whose duty it is to stoop to the unfortunate, to hear their cry and to help them, to rescue and relieve. Majestic from its mercy, venerable from its antiquity, uplifted without pride, and lovely even in its frown. It is a kingly figure, compact and grand, and fronts with face of welcome a weary world, and in answer to the universal cry for help it extends its "Lion's grip" that shall prevail.

This naturally leads me into the third and last division of my subject:

THE MISSION OF MASONRY.

The first grand mission of this Institution of ours is to teach men to so live that they may become living stones, fit for "that spiritual building, that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Symbolically, it takes the Temple of Solomon for its type, and you may know, my brothers, in the construction of that edifice, that was a marvel of the age, there was only allowed to go into it for its completion, "good work, true work, and square work;" that every stone was marked, squared and numbered, so that it was put together without the necessity of any tool or iron, and when completed it appeared to have been the work of the Grand Architect of the Universe, rather than any result of human skill or ingenuity. And so Masonry teaches us spiritually that each one

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of us should become good work, true work, and square work, to go into the completion of that temple above wherein our Heavenly Father presides; and just as the Shekinah shone with refulgent splendor, and the glory of the Lord filled the house at its dedication, so should His spirit fill our hearts and lives.

Another mission of Masonry is the education of the masses of the people of this country. She stands for free schools and public education. We do not believe that error can long triumph when an enlightened conscience is left free to combat it. Masonry has flourished when nations prospered and when the mind was left free.

In all countries where learning and freedom have arisen superior to intolerance and fanaticism, our Order has been supported by the wise and patronized by the great. Liberty, equality and fraternity are written upon the forefront of our every temple.

There are no dogmas in Masonry. Its secrecy is confined only to the means of communication, while its teachings and its tenets are universally approved. What it condemns no man upholds. The essence of Masonry is character, which is destiny. It is said of the ermine that it will suffer capture rather than to allow pollution to touch its glossy coat, for when that is taken the animal is worthless. So I might say that which elevates a nation is not an aristocracy of blood, not an aristocracy of wealth, not an aristocracy of talent only, but it is an aristocracy of character, and that elevated character is what Masonry seeks to impress upon her votaries.

Masonry stands and has always stood for law and order and obedience to the constituted authority of government.

We are under no obligations to defend criminals, or to protect them from the consequences of their evil doings. This teaching of ours should never be forgotten by those who might be confused by misguided zeal in the observance of their obligations.

The goal of Free Masonry, my Brethren, is ideal manhood. It is the star of our hope, the beacon light upon the shore to the mariner Mason tossed hither and thither upon the ocean stream of life.

Who of us would not rejoice with ineffable joy if he could this moment shake off the infirmities of nature and rise to the true dignity of ideal manhood, erect and proud in the consciousness of perfect purity and uprightness of character?

We know that we have a rough and rugged road to travel, one beset with many trials and difficulties, and that many of us grow faint and weary by the way, yet Masonry teaches that the aspirations of our natures should reach out towards the grand ideal of perfect manhood.

Masonry teaches us to be patriotic citizens, because when we are faithful to our country it certainly follows that we will be faithful to God and to our Lodges.

Many of our illustrious sons devoted their lives to the welfare of this country, and I have time only to mention a few.

"To him, whose voice first sounded the alarm of war in our Eastern colonies; whose arm bore the first banner that ever dipped its crimson folds in the blood of the foe of American freedom; he who, upon the heights of Charleston, fitting altar, offered up himself the first sacrifice for his country—the eloquent, the patriotic, the lamented Warren.

To him, the proscribed of tyrants, the sworn enemy of kings, whose bold hand first signed the pledge of American independence—the venerable Hancock.

To him, a brighter star than ever glittered in the coronet of Greece; a brighter star than ever glistened in the coronet of Rome; the brightest star that glitters in the diadem of nations; to him, the first in war, the first in peace, and the first in the hearts of his country-men—Washington.

To Franklin, the patriot, who in the day of danger stood foremost in his country's councils. The philosopher who, grappling with the tempest, despoiled the fearful element of its destructive artillery. To the learned and venerable Marshall, the father of American jurisprudence. To the names of Clinton, Bitterhouse and a host of others."

And when I tell you that all of these illustrious names are inscribed as high upon the records of Masonry as they are upon the scrolls of fame—that all were prominent members of our Order—that when Warren fell he was Grand Master throughout the colonies—that Washington founded a Lodge at Alexandria, over which he presided until his death—that Marshall was for forty years and until his death Master of a Lodge—that Clinton was for many years at the head of the Fraternity in the Union; and when I tell you further that not an officer of the Revolution, from the degree of Major to that of Commander-in-chief, but was a Mason, with one dark exception, that of Benedict Arnold—that during that eventful struggle not a battle was fought, not a victory won, not a trophy gained, not a deed of fame emblazoned upon the face of the national escutcheon, but the name of Mason mingled with the remembrance; when I tell our critics all this, methinks the still living voices of those departed philosophers, statesmen, patriots and heroes, as they arise from the closet council and ensanguined battlefield, sufficient to still the voices of calumny forever.

As we look around us and behold the great family of man pursuing their thousand devious ways, let us remember that all are brethren, having one common end, and as our hearts expand with unusual sympathy, let its impulses be regarded as the dictates of duty; and let each for himself remember the lesson which teaches that "the path of virtue is the way to happiness." This simple truth is the great result of all the deductions of religion and philosophy, and while it is your duty as men it is also your duty as Masons to recognize its force.

Follow then in the path of virtue. Let your aspirations to heaven be grateful as the incense, your love warm as its flame, your charity diffusive as its fragrance. Let your hearts be pure as the altar and your conduct as acceptable as the offering, and thus you will become pillars of wisdom, strength and beauty, adorning and upholding the majestic edifice of

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Masonry—pillars upon which it will continue to stand until that time when, amid the universal wreck, the dazzling brightness of the day and the deep blue of the empurpled night shall fade.

“When, like the baseless fabric of vision,
The Cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great Globe itself,
Yes, all which it inherits, shall dissolve.”

When those who can meet the test of the Grand Master of the Universe shall be clothed in the garments of Immortality and be permitted to enter that Lodge where He forever sitteth in the East.

So you see, my Brethren, the mission of Masonry is to lift mankind into a higher and more spiritual atmosphere; to make them law-abiding and patriotic citizens and to lead them toward the goal of ideal manhood. A far more noble and glorious purpose than simply hewing timbers and squaring stones is ours—that of fitting immortal nature for its home in the skies. Who can count the years of immortality, the home of the soul fitted for its place in the heavens?

Builders are building for a century only, while we build for Eternity. The great Pyramids of Egypt took the work of thousands for years to construct, and after all they are only mausoleums in which the bones of Rameses and the Pharaohs of long ago could repose in imperial magnificence.

We are not building for the dead, but for the living, that they might be fitted to soar aloft into the realms of ethereal bliss. Looking down the dim vista of the past a glorious record is ours. It has been beset by trials and conflicts that no other fraternal organization has ever experienced, yet it, the great Mother of them all, has emerged with a radiance undimmed and untarnished and facing a future more glorious than ever.

Sacred history tells us that the patriarch Moses, for striking the rock, was not permitted to enter the “promised land,” but just before he closed his eyes in eternal rest the Heavenly Father led him to Mt. Pisgah’s lofty height and there permitted him to view the land which he had sworn to give to his chosen people, Israel. With an eye that never grew dim, he looked back over the wilderness through which they had journeyed forty years, with all its difficulties and trials, and then turning with prophetic vision he looked over all the beautiful land of Canaan, with its ineffable glory and splendor, and then the Gracious Adonai kissed his spirit away into the celestial city of his own building, while the angel Michael was left to guard his body on the summit of Nebo’s mount.

So our Order can stand to-day on the pinnacle of the last century and review probably forty centuries of struggle and effort, and now, over two million strong in this land of liberty, it can turn its face with radiance to the future, which is as bright and glorious as the everlasting promises of God.

It should be our purpose to cast no blot upon its escutcheon.
As Masonry is a progressive science,

"Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate.
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait."

Let us remember the precious jewels of the Fellow Craft, and while we should heed the lessons of the Attentive Ear, the Instructive Tongue and the Faithful Breast, also let us be guided by the symbolic teaching of the Square, the Level and the Plumb. Remember,

"The level's a jewel when it levels men up,
But not so if it levels them down;
And the Mason, who levels his life by its gauge,
Will be laureled at last with a crown.

"But better than level is the right-angled Square,
For it teaches greater lessons of love;
By its angle men's lives are tested as true,
In this world and the Home that's above.

"We'll meet on the level and set by the square,
As Masons we know it's our duty to do;
And the world will be better and brighter and fair,
Because we've lived in it and journeyed life through."

So let us Eye and set that by the Masonic application of the tools of our Art we shall raise for ourselves an imperishable monument of virtue and morality, and when this living present shall have become itself the dead and distant past, the student of Masonic lore, standing as I do now and discoursing to generations yet unborn, shall find in us an example worthy of imitation and derive a new inspiration from the contemplation of the faded but not forgotten glories of an historic past.

"Long may this glorious Order stand for God, for home and native land,
My Brothers, round your altar true, resolve to purge your lives anew,
Until to bear a Mason's name will mean to bear heroic fame.
The atheist foemen still are strong, let Masonry repel this wrong,
And, to defeat this shameful foe, stand firm and help the Church of God.
That, when our labors here are o'er and we too hear the Boatmen's oar,
We clasp with joy his welcome hand and sail out to the Sunrise Land,
To hear, when the brief race is run, the Master's plaudit, "Child, well done."