

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEGEND OF HIRAM ABIFF

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*This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a speech given by the late Most Worshipful Brother Conrad Hahn, in 1972, while serving as the Executive Secretary of the Masonic Service Association.*

The legend of "Hiram, the widow's son," is the foundation of Freemasonry's ritualistic drama of the third, or Master's Degree. While it would be improper to reveal the details of the drama as it is presented in the lodge room, or to make public the ritualistic secrets and symbolism which it contains, the story of Hiram is so well known and has been referred to in Masonic writings so frequently that it has become a part of the cultural heritage of civilized men everywhere.

Briefly stated, the Hiramic legend is as follows: When Solomon, King of Israel, undertook the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, he sent to Hiram, King of Tyre, for materials and assistance. In exchange for agricultural products like corn and wine and oil, King Hiram sent Solomon cedar trees cut from the forests of Lebanon and a skilled and cunning worker in metals. These facts may be found in the Old Testament, especially in Chapter 7 of I Kings and Chapter 2 of 11 Chronicles, where the skilled artisan, named Hiram, is referred to as the "son of a widow of the tribe of Naphtali" whose husband was "a man of Tyre."

This much of the Masonic legend of Hiram comes from the Bible; but the story known to Masons has a tragically different development. Hiram, called Abiff (which is simply a Hebrew expression for "father," a term of respect), worked for King Solomon at Jerusalem, not only in casting all the metallic ornaments for the Temple, but also as a Master of the Works, a superintending architect.

More than 85,000 workmen were employed in the building of the Temple; it took approximately seven years to complete. To those workmen who labored faithfully on the project was promised the status of Master Workman, or Mason, upon its completion.

But some time before the Temple's completion, some of the workmen became dissatisfied and demanded the promotion which they had been promised. Not being organized like modern employees and being used to the harsher and more brutal modes of direct action characteristic of the more primitive times in which they lived, they sought the higher wages and fringe benefits of a Master Workman by conspiring to extort them from Hiram Abiff.

In spite of their violent threats, Hiram steadfastly refused to yield to their demands. Reminding them of their obligations to King Solomon and his God, he resolutely insisted that they honor the contracts by which he and they were bound. Three of them, more brutal than the rest, conspired to attack Master Hiram to force the concessions they were demanding; but he, being faithful to his trust, was more adamant in his refusal, and they in their wrath slew him in the unfinished Temple.

That, essentially, is the legend of Hiram which has become in Masonry one of the most impressive ritualistic dramas of all time. Historically-minded Brethren continue to wonder from whence it came and whose imagination and gifts of language transmitted it into the matchless drama which furnishes the core of "the sublime degree of Master Mason."

Certainly, the tragedy of Hiram is not to be found in the Bible. If only one Hiram is referred to in the Old Testament, the story of his assassination is not corroborated in either I Kings or 11 Chronicles; for there we read as follows: "So Hiram finished all the work he did for King Solomon on the House of the Lord."

Dr. Joseph Fort Newton, the most gifted and inspiring of Masonic writers fifty years ago, chose to believe that the tragic story of Hiram was long in the possession of operative Masons from the Middle Ages down to the dawn of Speculative Masonry in the 17th and 18th centuries. This I seriously doubt, since no mention of Hiram is to be found in any of the Old Charges and Gothic Constitutions, or in any of the remnants of old ritualistic practices to be found in the records of operative lodges which date from 100 years or more before the founding of the first Grand Lodge, which marks the beginning of the era of modern Speculative Freemasonry in 1717. Had there been even a shred of evidence that the Hiramic legend existed in Masonry before that date, I feel sure that Dr. James Anderson would have known of it and used it in the legendary history of the Craft which he published in The Constitutions of the Freemasons in 1723.

Furthermore, modern Masonic scholars have shown rather conclusively that there was no tri-gradual system of initiation during the period of operative Masonry, that there was no third or Master Mason Degree as a rite or ceremony before the creation of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717. The first recital of the Hiramic legend as the dramatic cornerstone of a third or Master Mason's degree appears in an expose of the ritual of Freemasonry entitled *Masonry Dissected*, written by a Samuel Prichard and published in London in 1730.

Consequently, it seems a logical conclusion to assume that the Master Mason Degree, and with it, the legend of Hiram Abiff, were introduced into Freemasonry when it became a speculative, or philosophic organization.

Just where did the legend of Hiram come from? No one really knows; scholars have yet to discover its origins and its introduction into Freemasonry. My own scholarly prejudices lead me to believe that it's a re-working of some mediaeval mystery play, whose original may yet be discovered in a private library or the rubbish of an ancient building.

Mystery plays were the most popular form of public entertainment in the Middle Ages. Each guild or trade had its own preferred dramas; most of them were Biblical in origin. They were produced, staged and acted by members of the guild, first in churches, and then in public squares, to which they were banished when the plays became too boisterous and irreverent for the sacerdotal authorities.

These dramas were called mysteries, not because they treated of witches, ghosts, or detectives, but because they were produced by craft guilds or "mysteres," which is variant of the French word "mestaire," a craft or guild. So the plays became known in England as mysteres, or mysteries,

because they were produced by "mestaires," or guilds. The expression, "the mysteries of Freemasonry," therefore, originally meant the ritualistic ceremonies, or work of the Lodge.

To Masons who thirst for historical certainty about Hiram Abiff and his position in Masonic ritual, I can only give a dusty answer. It's not really important.

It's a mistake to consider the Hiramic legend as history. There was a Hiram Abiff in history, but our Third Degree is not interested in him as such. The drama of Hiram is a conflict of a man with other men, of an individual against evil forces embodied in other men.

Hiram Abiff is the dramatized symbol of the human soul-of mine, of yours, of every man. The work he was engaged in is symbolic of the work which you and I are committed to perform in the supervision, organization and direction of our lives from birth to dissolution. The enemies that Hiram meets are really symbols of those lusts and passions and failures of the spirit which in ourselves and others make war on our characters and spiritual aspirations.

In my opinion, this symbolic increment to the Hiramic legend was added by one of the Speculative Masons of the early Eighteenth Century, by someone with the education and philosophical attainments of a man like Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers or other Rosicrucian adept.

Hiram's death was also his triumph--as the resurrection of truth over ignorance is always a victory, in spite of its being buried for a while in the rubbish of scorn and deliberate persecution.

This is the real importance of the legend of Hiram, that it still stirs men to serve the Truth by steadfastly maintaining the necessity of their noblest aspirations, even to apparent defeat in death, out of which can arise a more perfect Living Perpendicular!

Edwin Booth, the famous actor and loyal Mason, was no mean judge of the essence of tragedy; he evaluated the Hiramic legend in these words:

"In all my research and study, in all my close analysis of the masterpieces of Shakespeare, in my earnest determination to make those plays appear real on the mimic stage, I have never, and nowhere, met tragedy so real, so sublime, so magnificent as the legend of Hiram. It is substance without shadow--the manifest destiny of life which requires no picture and scarcely a word to make a lasting impression upon all who understand. To be a Worshipful Master, and to throw my whole soul into that work, with the candidate for my audience and the Lodge for my stage, would be a greater personal distinction than to receive the plaudits of people in the theaters of the world."

And that should tell us, if we are Master Workmen, what we should do with the legend of Hiram when we work in "the mysteries of Freemasonry." We must make it truly sublime!

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