

The Seventh Sign

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*And when He thus had spoken, He cried with
a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.
And he that was dead came forth, bound
hand and foot with graveclothes;
Jesus saith unto them,
Loose him, and let him go.*

John 11: 43-44

The biblical book of John cites fewer of Jesus' miracles than do the other synoptic, or New Testament gospels, and refers to them not as miracles, but rather as signs. The seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, is the final and summarizing miracle in that gospel attesting to the power of the Christ to alter the normal rules of life, and the ultimate expression of transcendence prior to his own crucifixion and subsequent resurrection.

Lazarus lived with his two sisters in the small village of Bethany, just outside the Holy City. Jesus had visited their home and left with his disciples at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. Although warned of Lazarus' illness, Jesus did not immediately return to his side. By the time of his return, Lazarus had been dead for several days, and the family remarked on how his body would surely have decomposed as well as the misfortune of Jesus arriving on the scene so late, since an earlier arrival would have likely offered an opportunity for a miracle in time to prevent the death. To everyone's surprise, Jesus declared that Lazarus was not dead at all, but only sleeping. In the midst of the onlookers' skepticism, Lazarus was raised from the dead and walked again among his brethren⁽¹³⁾. Could such a story be true? A provocative suggestion lies in history. When Titus conquered Jerusalem and the destroyed Bethany was rebuilt, it was renamed Al-Lazaria, which it is called to this day. It would seem that something unusual must have happened there to warrant such an action.

In the Christian Bible, Job summarizes the basic question thus: "If a man die, shall he live again?", and then affirms that "all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come"⁽¹³⁾. But the theme of change, i.e., life, death, and rebirth, is even

more ancient, and is found in every age throughout cultures worldwide⁽²⁵⁾. This pattern reflects the annual cycles of nature in birth (spring), maturity (summer), death (autumn/winter) and the following spring (rebirth), thus dramatizing the personification of the sun as a mythical figure and portraying for historical people the belief that death is the herald of life. Early symbolism of the acacia (evergreen) reflects faith in such a concept. Since it stays green and fresh in the death of winter, it probably was thought to be inhabited by a spirit more powerful than the Power of Darkness, preserving life until the warmth of the sun returned⁽²³⁾. Interestingly, there is also an Egyptian myth regarding the acacia. Bitiou, a great hero to his people, was protected by the tree. But if the acacia was cut, Bitiou would die, only to be returned to life with even more wisdom and power than before⁽⁹⁾. This idea is still with us as the climax of all that Masonry teaches, namely, a life, a death, and a resurrection⁽⁵⁾.

The oldest recorded narrative epic is the Epic of Gilgamesh written some 4,000 years ago. Gilgamesh was an unusual epic hero in that his major quest had an intellectual and spiritual purpose. He searched for Light, or knowledge. Seeking to understand immortality, he traveled from east to west through a dark tunnel and then crossed the waters of death. Upon his return to the world of the living he pondered the wisdom revealed during his transformation: the search for uninterrupted life in the flesh is in vain⁽²⁴⁾.

Egyptian mythology of about the same period portrays the cycle of the god Osiris. From Egypt's earliest times, Osiris was the god of grain and the Nile River. Just as the Nile floods, dries out, and

floods again, so Osiris lived, died and was reborn, representing the death and regeneration of the Nile's vegetation⁽⁶⁾. In the Chinese myth of the King Mu, Death's empire lies to the west of the world, on the distant bank of the river of life. The best of men are given a song after they die, to help them on their journey eastward to be reborn. The Senoi of the Malay Peninsula maintain a holy myth about the death of a sacred monkey who is raised to life by a priest. The nearby Semang pygmies portray a complicated series of trials for the human spirit to achieve rebirth, culminating in the individual nursing from breasts found on a magic tree⁽⁹⁾. In the Homeric Hymns of Greece, Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, was kidnapped by Hades, god of the Underworld. After some negotiation, she was permitted to return to the land of the living with the understanding that she would return to Hades for four months of each year, thus explaining the annual onset of winter. Essentially the same story is told of Mithras (Persian), Dionysus (Syrian), and Bacchus (Roman)⁽³⁾. In his eighth and twelfth labors, Heracles (Hercules) wrestled with Death for the return of his friend Alcestis, and defeated Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hell⁽²⁴⁾.

Some major religions today portray the themes of perpetual recurrence and rebirth as well, notably Buddhism and Hinduism. In Buddhism, the soul is continually reincarnated until it achieves a state of perfection. The Hindus believe that God takes three forms: Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva. These divine manifestations direct the life cycle of the universe from creation through disintegration and dissolution to re-creation; this pattern is eternal⁽¹⁾. Although Jesus himself said very little concerning what was likely to take place after death, Christianity has developed its major doctrine based on his death and resurrection⁽⁴⁾, a theme symbolized in literature, even children's books⁽¹⁶⁾. Indeed, for some scholars it seems clear that the Hiram legend of Masonry refers to these events, also. Jesus is seen as "the Hiram Abif of the spiritual temple" in that both fall to a dark conspiracy, at the high noon of life, are buried, and on the third day arise again⁽¹⁹⁾. Additionally, the 118th Psalm makes reference that "The stone which the builders refused has become the head of the corner"⁽¹³⁾. This could be interpreted as a reference to both Jesus and the keystone of the Mark Master's degree. Life after death is portrayed more abstractly in a Masonic tale from Barbados in which coffins in a sealed vault move themselves

about when placed beneath a shelf bearing the Square and Compasses⁽¹⁸⁾.

Biblical references to Hiram Abif in I Kings and II Chronicles⁽¹³⁾ do not relate the legend in the same way as does the Master Mason degree, in that the Biblical Hiram is not murdered⁽¹³⁾. The Masonic version is surely the most important of all the legends of Freemasonry⁽⁷⁾, and some believe that a Degree is not really Masonic unless it contains a reference to Hiram or the Temple⁽⁸⁾. This criteria effectively limits acceptable Degrees to the Fellowcraft, Master Mason, Mark and Most Excellent Masters of the York Rite and The Secret and Perfect Masters and Elus of the 9 and 15 in the Scottish Rite.

There exists little agreement on the legend's origin. Masonic scholar Henry Wilson Coil writes that the origin is entirely unknown⁽⁸⁾. Author William Moseley Brown indicates that no mention of Hiram is made in manuscripts before 1550, and that Hiram as Masons portray him did not appear until the early 1600's⁽⁵⁾. Another source reports that the first Hiram reference was not written until about 1730, but notes that few early Masonic records would have been written down at all⁽¹⁴⁾.

While the legend in its present form may be comparatively modern, its underlying principles are found much earlier⁽¹⁰⁾. Long antecedent to Freemasonry are European motifs such as "The head of the murdered apprentice" (with wounds identical to Hiram's), and "The Widowed Mother"⁽²⁾. C. Bruce Hunter and John J. Robinson have individually written advocating the view that the Hiram legend is a veiled description of the fall of the Knights Templar⁽¹⁴⁾. Others have different views. It is said that the legend establishes the resurrection of the body^{(5) (20)}, proclaims eternity in the midst of life⁽⁶⁾, transforms the profane into members of a fraternal organization⁽¹⁴⁾, refers to the fall from grace in the garden of Eden⁽¹³⁾, is calculated to convey the sacredness of obligation⁽¹¹⁾, to teach that betrayal is a fate worse than death⁽²²⁾, represents Christ rising in three days, or three degrees^{(4) (7) (10) (25)}, teaches the magnificent lessons of fidelity⁽²¹⁾, relates the spiritual regeneration of Osiris by his initiation into mysteries⁽¹⁰⁾, dramatizes the lifting of the soul from the animal condition, thus squaring the rough ashlar⁽¹⁹⁾, provides a replacement

for what was lost ⁽¹²⁾, or is a deliberate distortion of the ritual of human sacrifice ⁽²⁾. Even more esoteric is the view that Hiram parallels the Kundalini of Hindu mysticism, representing the “Spirit Fire” moving through the 33 segments (degrees) of the spinal column ⁽¹⁰⁾. And it is interesting to read Albert Pike’s assessment:

From the journey of the sun through the zodiac...came the legend of the murder of Khuram (Hiram), representative of the Sun, by the three Fellowcrafts, symbols of the winter signs of Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces...who slew him at the winter solstice... (the remaining) Fellowcrafts’ number corresponds with that of the Pleiades and Hyades in the constellation Taurus ⁽²⁴⁾.

A more prosaic speculation notes Hiram’s death in the east and subsequent transport west and the movement of the Entered Apprentice eastward to the northeast corner for his rebirth, and that the date of this Degree will be referred to as his Masonic Birthday ⁽²⁾.

Even the name of the character is not settled. It may be that Abif means “his father” ⁽²¹⁾, “my father, the universal spirit” ⁽¹⁰⁾, or is Hebrew for “was raised up to life” ⁽²⁰⁾.

In any event, there is an obvious problem. The ritual Hiram Abif does *not* come back to life; he is raised but *not* resurrected. The Masonic drama tells us that after he was raised he was re-buried in a more suitable location. So the symbolic transformation must, of necessity, be of a non-corporeal nature. We are not told by Scripture how the raised Lazarus differed from his previous self. Yet it is clear that the raised Mason is different in several ways. He is brought face to face with the mystery of his own impending death and is provided “a new birth in time, to wear a new body of intention, desire and purpose” ⁽²⁵⁾. Therefore, unlike the First and Second Degrees, wherein the symbols and emblems of architecture are described, in the Master Mason Degree the symbolism, “cast in the language of the soul, is its life, its tragedy, and its triumph” ⁽⁵⁾.

The spiritual and moral interpretation of the raising are indicated by the final class of symbols. The Spade, Setting Maul and Coffin are clearly emblems

of physical mortality. The Skull and Crossed Bones are a continual reminder that the spiritual nature attains liberation only after the *philosophical* death of man’s sensuous personality ⁽¹⁰⁾, and the previously mentioned acacia represents the continuation of life.

The profound Masonic scholar W. Kirk MacNulty expands the symbolic interpretation by suggesting that the death described in the Degree is an “individual psychological process” that is the emotional equivalent of physical death. This death occurs at birth, when, by taking on flesh, the individual loses direct contact with God. This describes man’s current, apparently isolated, spiritual situation. The reconciliation occurs when the Fellowcraft, as the Temple itself, is psychologically brought to completion. This is the same frightening re-construction of the Self that can be found in psychotherapy ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Although the ritual may be watched by others, it is an entirely subjective experience. Observing a candidate in the midst of the drama is somewhat like trying to determine the color of a chameleon resting on a mirror; you cannot so impart it because you are not personally receiving it. Furthermore, his insights and conclusions may well be different than those that another Mason has experienced. And in any case may not be solidified in his mind until much later.

The secret of the transforming Power is symbolized by The Word, which is not only the principal symbol of Freemasonry today but had as well a prominent place in the worship of the early Hebrew people ⁽⁵⁾. It is the symbol of the transformed man, a creature unlike any other. He has lost himself and journeyed within. He returned with understanding of both his importance as a manifestation of the Creator and his irrelevance in many of the ways that he formerly considered himself. When the Bible states that “You must be born anew in order to see the Kingdom of God” ⁽¹³⁾, it speaks of a spiritual and psychological transformation. Other cultures refer to *enlightenment*, the deflation of the personal ego and the gaining of insight into one’s true and secure place in the cosmos. This is the “beginning of correspondence with the original fountain of experience” ⁽²⁵⁾, and the literal connection with Power, not the end of a process.

The characters in the Hiram drama are similar to men that the candidate meets everyday. Some are leaders who try to impress their concepts upon subordinates, some are sincere, and a few are evil⁽²²⁾. Thus Masons are taught the value of humility, are reminded of the short time at their disposal and the seriousness of their obligations⁽¹¹⁾. The ritual may further illustrate a resurrection from ignorance to wisdom, from intellectual darkness to light, from selfishness to love, and from sin to righteousness⁽⁴⁾. Thus, although it is a tragedy of Evil⁽⁵⁾, it is also the hope of man that he is capable of something more⁽⁶⁾; that transformed by the Spirit, he might live the remainder of his life on a different moral plane. Masons are told that they are not transformed by the dim Light of the natural world and reason, nor by the assertion of the immortality of the soul, but by the actual resurrection of both the body and the spirit. This symbolism means that every atom of man is intimately connected with the Eternal Consciousness that dwells within as well as without all things⁽²⁶⁾. Consequently, the last and greatest trial in the Master Mason Degree lies in the conscious realization of the unity with the One who permeates the universe, raising the man from conditions of unreality to a knowledge of the ultimate reality, peace and existence immortal⁽¹⁵⁾.

In all ages men have witnessed evil triumph over virtue and truth, and thereby seem a horrifying example of invincibility. But always this defeat is temporary, and the evil eventually yields and is crushed. Just so, all past evil in a human life can be prologue to a transformation of the spirit. We are united in our ritual, and in our great solitary quests to touch the Infinite.

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