The Perfect Cubit — Masonic Legend Or Fable

by
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DEDICATED

To the loving memory of Reverend and Brother John Henry Powers in his earlier years a stone mason by trade, he founded the Powers Memorial Baptist Church, served with distinction on the Virginia State Baptist Mission Board, member of Old Town Lodge No. 68, A.F. & A.M., Galax, Virginia, Masonic Scholar and Master Teacher, Exemplary Mason and Cherished Friend

1870-1961

Masonry, the more it is examined, the more beautiful it becomes. This paper which I have prepared, howsoever imperfect, is an attempt to explore the origin of the perfect cubit. It is my prayer that it may induce others having more extensive means of information and time for elaborate research, to accept the challenge.

Admittedly, the existence of a "Perfect Cubit" has neither historical authority nor logical possibility to support it. It was first implanted in my mind by Reverend and Brother John Henry Powers, my wife's grandfather, for whom I had the greatest respect and admiration in all the years I had the privilege of sharing his friendship and Masonic knowledge. This paper is dedicated to his loving memory, to his intelligence, and his profound influence on my life. He truly exemplified the greatest teachings of Freemasonry. While I come from a Masonic family, including my father, father-in-law, a number of uncles and other relatives, I suppose Reverend Powers was the one singular person who most influenced by decision to petition Freemasonry. Then, in 1946 following by being raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason, our warm relationship blossomed and grew with each passing year. I treasure the countless evenings I spent with him in his study, as he discussed with me the origins and ageless teachings of Freemasonry. He was a Masonic scholar, possessing the keen mind of a Master Teacher. Born in 1870, he was one of the great evangelistic Baptist preachers who rode horse-

back over the dirt roads of Kentucky and Virginia, preaching the Gospel. This man of God was a member of Old Town Lodge No. 68, at Galax, Virginia, and when I became a Mason he was seventy-six years of age.

During one of our many sessions together, he expounded on the building of King Solomon's Temple. It was his belief, which I share, that the origin of Masonry took place at the building of Solomon's Temple, and that King Solomon was [1]

Moreover, Reverend George Oliver in "Antiquities of Freemasonry" said these periods [2]

Reverend Powers spoke of Solomon's recruiting over one hundred and fifty thousand stone Masons, hewers of timber, artificers of previous metals, laborers and overseers from all over the land, many speaking in strange tongues, making communication difficult. Chapter Two, Second Book of Chronicles relates how "Solomon numbered all the strangers who were in the land of Israel, after the numbering wherewith David, his father, had numbered them; and they were found one hundred and fifty thousand and three thousand and six hundred. And he set three score and ten thousand of them to be bearers of burdens and fourscore thousand to be hewers in the mountain, and three thousand and six hundred overseers to set the people to work."[3]

Grandfather Powers reflected on the monumental task that was Solomon's to meld such a huge body of workmen, sorting out their various talents and abilities, and organizing them into an effective and harmonious work force to commence building the temple.

Yet, perhaps Solomon's greatest problem, Reverend Powers suggested, was the lack of a uniform measure of length by which the stones, timbers and other materials could be joined with accuracy. He spoke of the cubit, which was used as a measure of length by the Hebrews, Egyptians, and Babylonians, being the distance from the elbow to the extremity of the middle finger or approximately eighteen inches.

the first Grand Master, and Hiram of Tyre and Hiram Abif were his Wardens.

Dr. James Anderson accepts this legend in the second edition of his "Constitutions" when he says that King Solomon was Grand Master of all Masons at Jerusalem; Hiram, King of Tyre, was Grand Master at Tyre, and Hiram Abif, in Solomon's absence, filled the chair as Deputy Grand Master, and, in his presence was Senior Grand Warden. occupy a space of three thousand years; and I have selected them for illustration, because it is generally believed that Masonry took its rise at the building of King Solomon's Temple. Understandably, the cubit would vary by the physical size of the workman or overseer, and thus, precluding the use of an exact measure, World Book Encyclopedia states that generally the cubit was the length of a man's forearm from his elbow to the tip of his middle finger. The cubit of the Ancient Egyptians was about 21 inches long. That of the Ancient Romans was 17.5 inches. The Jewish cubit was 22 inches.[4]

Coil in his Masonic Encyclopedia says the cubit was a measure used by the Hebrews, the exact length of which has been the subject of much uncertainty and dispute. The majority opinion is that it is the length of the forearm and hand from the elbow to the extremity of the middle finger or approximately 18 inches. The Egyptian common cubit was 17.72 inches; the Egyptian Royal cubit was 20.67 inches; and the Roman Attic cubit was 17.57 inches.[5]

Marsengill, Editor (The Philalethes Society) said, "According to Bishop Cumberland, the Hebrew cubit was 21 inches but according to all other authorities it was approximately 18 inches. Two kinds of cubits were known: the Sacred (36 inches) and the Profane (18 inches). The measurements given in the Bible about Solomon's Temple are all based on the Profane or common cubit."[6]

Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia refers to Hasints Dictionary of the Bible (page 967), "We have at present no means of ascertaining the exact dimensions of the Hebrews' ordinary and

Royal cubits. The balance of evidence is certainly in favor of a fairly close approximation to the Egyptian system."[7]

The Maryland Master Mason Handbook declares that it is of great interest that archaeological research has revealed that in Solomon's day there were three different cubits; a Land cubit which was used for plotting the layout of the Temple's courts and the surrounding terrace, which had a length of about 17.6 inches; a Building cubit used in the erection of buildings was about 14.4 inches; and a Gold cubit used in the construction of the gold and silver vessels and decorative work which was equal to about 10.8 inches. All these three are found to be multiples of the basic palm breadth of 3.6 inches which was used by the Babylonians and also the Hebrews.[8]

Amid all of this confusion about a unit of measure, especially finding one which was uniform and dependable, Reverend Powers said the ancient workmen of the Temple fashioned a rope of human hair which was knotted at three, five, and seven cubits. The human hair was chosen because it was unaffected by heat or cold, and thus maintained a constant length. He called this, "The Perfect Cubit," which enabled the workmen to join the stones, timbers and other materials with accuracy.

In Oliver's Antiquities he said ". . . The structure thus begun, according to a plan given to Solomon by David, his father, upon the Ark of Alliance, every energy was used to render it a perfect specimen of art. Every stone, every piece of timber, was carved, marked, and numbered in the quarry and the forest; and nothing remained for the workmen at Jerusalem but to join the materials with precision, on a reference to the marks and numbers. This was affected without the use of either axe, hammer, or metal tool; so that nothing was heard at Zion, save harmony and peace."[9] It is a real testimonial to the Ancient Craftsmen that the parts could be so shaped at great distance and fit as they were intended. Grandfather Powers contended that this was due in part to the use of the Perfect Cubit.

I have reflected many times upon the significance of the three knots in the Perfect Cubit . . . three, five, and seven. Mackey in his History (Volume I) referred to the symbolic character of those sacred numbers in the teaching of our Ancient Art and Science . . . three, five, and seven. In the same spirit of symbolic reference the steps of the winding stairs leading to the middle chamber were divided into a series of three, five, and seven.[10]

I said at the onset of this paper that the existence of a "Perfect Cubit" has no historical authority. None surfaced during my research. Again, Mackey in Volume One (p. 9) states for a faithful and thorough inquiry of the history of Freemasonry, carefully separate the two periods into which it may be naturally divided, The Historic, and The Prehistoric.

The Historic is the period within which we have genuine documents in reference to the existence of the order.

The Prehistoric is the period within which we have no such records and where we have to depend wholly upon legends and traditions.[11]

In the preface to Mackey's History (Page VII) Robert Ingham Clegg reflected that Brother Mackey . . . pointing out that the very age of the Masonic institution had tended to confuse mere traditions or legends with the authentic truths of history and he welcomed light from all directions but carefully applied critical standards to the source and standing of the information that came his way. By no means was he ready to reject a Masonic Legend as fable.[12]

So I leave it up to the Masonic scholars and prominent historians, imminently more qualified than I, to determine whether "The Perfect Cubit" is a Masonic legend or fable.

Now, from Second Corinthians . . . "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of Love and peace shall be with you."[13]

NOTES

[1]. Anderson's "Constitutions" (Second Edition) Chapter III (1738) pp. 12, 13, 15.

[2]. Rev. George Oliver, "The Antiquities of Freemasonry (1854) pp. IX

[3]. Holy Bible, Second Book of Chronicles, Chapter 2, Verses 17-18

[4]. 1962 World Book Encyclopedia

[5]. Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia (Macoy), Page 153

[6]. Editor, Jerry Marsengill, The Philalethes Society, in response to letter from Colonel Catlin E. Tyler, Librarian, A. & A. S. R., Richmond Consistory (January 25, 1985)

[7]. Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia, Page 257

[8]. The Maryland Master Mason Handbook (1976) p. 265

[9]. Oliver, "The Antiquities of Freemasonry" (1843) p. 321

[10]. Mackey's History of Freemasonry (Volume I, 1921) Chap. 24, p. 167

[11]. Mackey's History of Freemasonry (Volume I, 1921) p. 9

[12]. Preface to Mackey's history of Freemasonry (1921) p. VII by Robert Ingham Clegg.

[13]. Holy Bible, II Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verse 11