

# RELIGION, FREEMASONRY, AND SCRIPTURE: PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN OUR HISTORY

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Keynote Presentation at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Festive Board of The Rubicon Masonic Society, Friday, September 27, 2024, at Spindletop Hall, Lexington, Kentucky

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Is Freemasonry a religion? This question has elicited strong opinions from Masons, churches and society for over 200 years. Several religious denominations have accused us of being a religion, including at times, the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Church, the Anglican, and Lutheran Churches, and even my own denomination out of England, the Methodist Church. What do you think? Does our worship and practice of God (who we address at the Great Architect of the Universe) constitute a religion? Or are we just religious? Having the form of a religion but not the substance.

It is interesting how some of our most venerated Masonic Lights approached this issue. Albert Pike in *Morals and Dogma* says, **"Every Masonic Lodge is a temple of religion; and its teachings are instruction in religion"** (213). In another place, **"This is the true religion revealed to the ancient patriarchs, which Masonry has taught for many centuries, and which it will continue to teach as long as time endures"** (214)<sup>1</sup> And again, **"Masonry is not a religion.... But Masonry teaches, and has preserved in their purity, the cardinal tenets of the old primitive faith, which underlie and are the foundation of all religions. Masonry is the universal morality."**<sup>2</sup>

Author and doctor Albert Gallatin Mackey, writes, **"We contend, without any sort of hesitation, that Freemasonry in every sense of the word.... an eminently religious institution is indebted solely to the religious element it contains for its origin as well as its continued existence, and that without this religious element it would scarcely be worthy of cultivation by the wise and good."**<sup>3</sup>

Henry Pirtle in his *Kentucky Monitor* states succinctly **"Masonry is a religious institution"** (28).<sup>4</sup>

Reverend and Doctor Joseph Fort Newton writes, **"...Masonry is not a religion but Religion – not a church but a worship, in which men of all religions may unite, unless they insist that all who worship with them must think exactly and in detail as they think about all things in the heaven above and in the earth beneath."**<sup>5</sup> And in another place, (religion) **"It is**

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, 1932 edition

<sup>2</sup> Albert Pike, Chapter X.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Mackey, 2 volumes, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, 1929 edition, Revised and Enlarged by Robert Clegg, 847.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Pirtle, *Kentucky Monitor*, 10th Edition, 1921.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, *The Religion of Masonry*, Southern Publishers Inc., Kingsport, TN, 1927, 11.

the life of God in the life of man whereby, as Dante said, we learn to make our lives eternal.”<sup>6</sup>

## RELIGION AND FREEMASONRY

The religious nature of Freemasonry has been recognized by every Grand Lodge in North America (often posted to their webpages). The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on its webpage is typical:

**“All who join Freemasonry must declare their belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and practice their own personal faith, but the fraternity is neither a religion nor a place to worship. Rather, it is a place where men of all monotheistic creeds can meet and focus on the shared values of peaceful human interaction that are common to all religions.”<sup>7</sup>**

Certainly, much ink and effort has been spent to answer the question, Is Freemasonry a religion? And beyond doubt our fraternity practices some of the basic elements of religion – we open and close our lodges in prayer. We use Scripture in our rituals (which we will discuss in greater detail). We reference God many times in our ritual and use a Masonic appellation (The Great Architect of the Universe) to address God. We insist that morality, ethical conduct, and brotherly love prescribe our actions and identify our members.

Beyond this, esoteric studies into the history and philosophy of the Craft reveal a long line of institutions even to this present day from which we have inherited the tenets, form and traditions of our fraternity.

To prove my point – What do these seeming disparate groups have in common? The Egyptian gods Osiris and Isis – the doctrine of Purgatory in the Roman Catholic Church – Marshall Applewhite’s Heaven’s Gate cult in California and the video game Ace Combat5: the Unsung War? In fact, they and hundreds of other groups are all formed on the principles of mystery religion in whole or in part. They hold all or some of the five common identifiers of a mystery religion:

- Elaborate initiation rituals and ceremonies often with meals
- Vow-making and an obligation to secrecy
- Obedience with promised salvation or a better afterlife
- Foster social bonds
- Practices often based on myths of death and rebirth, with symbolic elements representing spiritual transformation<sup>8</sup>
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Most Masons never realize that our fraternity is also in this long line of mystery or esoteric tradition. They might be even more surprised to know that Christianity also comes out of this tradition. In the church there is a time of preparation before initiation (such as confirmation and baptism), periods of fasting and banquets (such as eucharist); vigils and early-morning ceremonies;

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, 34.

<sup>7</sup> <https://pagrandlodge.org/masonic-frequently-asked-questions/> (Accessed 09-18-2024)

<sup>8</sup> Merkelbach, Reinhold. "Mystery Religion". Encyclopedia Britannica, 9 Aug. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mystery-religion>. Accessed 10 September 2024.

pilgrimages and new names for the initiates that form a large part of Christian ritual and can be identified with this pattern.<sup>9</sup> Other similarities with Christianity include our most sacred holidays or feast days with Christmas on the same day as the birth of sun god Mithra on Dec. 25, or Easter celebrated on Spring equinox, whose name comes from the pagan god Eostre.

Please understand me, my brothers, I am not saying that all mystery religions are equal. History shows that Christianity simply subsumed the pagan (or non-Christian) holidays to enhance its budding tradition with new meanings and practice. The point is that all religions have common elements, and even Freemasonry fits into this pattern with our initiation rituals, festive boards, and most especially our ethical and moral teaching that are founded upon belief in God and life everlasting. As Joseph Fort Newton states so eloquently in his book *The Religion of Masonry* “our Gentle Craft at its heart professes a belief in a power greater than ourselves and a purpose to our ethical and moral conduct that affects our eternal destiny”.<sup>10</sup>

Author and expert in comparative religion Dr. William Whalen says, **“The religion of Masonry is pure theism. The truth is that Masonry is undoubtedly a religious institution...which, handed down through a long succession of ages from the ancient priesthood who first taught it, embraces the great tenets of the existence of God and the Immortality of the soul.”**<sup>11</sup>

In a paper titled, *“Deism, Rational Theism, and the Religious Philosophy of Freemasonry”* I have argued that rational theism is the best name of our religious philosophy. Unlike the prevailing Deism of Enlightenment England in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century ours was a belief that rationalism, Christian faith, and natural religion can coexist compatibly. Rational theism understands that the God revealed in the natural world could also be known in a personal relationship through prayer. Among other things, the fact that prayer opens and closes every Masonic lodge meeting affirms this principle.<sup>12</sup>

Newton traces the Christian foundation of our Craft all the way back to the operative builders of the cathedrals and castles in the Middle Ages and more especially the influence of the Catholic Church. This relationship with the Christian church is inseparable from operative Freemasonry. As the Cooke Manuscript of about 1425 enjoins the Masons *“principally to love god and holy chyrche & alle ballows”* (all saints).<sup>13</sup> Nearly all of the more than 130 Old Charges of the operative craft discovered from the 14<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries begin with a Christian prayer to God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

## PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF OUR RITUAL

We turn now to the pivotal moments in the formation of Freemasonry. We have ample evidence through the Old Charges that describes the duties and obligations of masons' and builders' guilds, as well as the mythical history of the operative craft's creation. It is within these foundational

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<sup>9</sup> Merkelbach, Reinhold. "Mystery Religion". (Accessed 09-10-2024)

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, *The Religion of Masonry*, Chapter VII "The Last Landmark", Southern Publishers Inc., Kingsport, TN, 1927

<sup>11</sup> William J. Whalen, *Christianity and American Freemasonry*, Bruce Publishing Company, 1958, Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> Terry L. Tilton, *Deism, Rational Theism, and the Religious Philosophy of Freemasonry*, AQC, Vol. 135, 201-220.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Liagre, *One long neglected element: the religious factor in Freemasonry*, [https://www.academia.edu/28728495/One\\_long\\_neglected\\_element\\_the\\_religious\\_factor\\_in\\_Freemasonry](https://www.academia.edu/28728495/One_long_neglected_element_the_religious_factor_in_Freemasonry) (Accessed 03-20-2024)

texts, particularly the Regius poem (1390), also known as the Halliwell manuscript, and the Cooke manuscript (1410) for England, as well as the Schaw Statutes (1598) and the Edinburgh manuscript (1696) for Scotland, that speculative Freemasonry draws its primary sources.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, they give us scant information on the actual ritual and procedure for initiation into these craft guilds. Much of what we know must be inferred or deduced from later developments to reconstruct the past. Likewise, this reconstruction while looking back, can draw differing conclusions.

For example, Martin Gandoff in his book for the tri-centennial celebration of the Premier Grand Lodge of England in 2017, titled *Over Three Hundred Years of Masonic Ritual*, says the Old Charges indicate that at first just one degree (Entered Apprentice) was needed to be recognized as a trained mason. Later by the end of 17th century there would be two Degrees – Entered Apprentice and the Fellow of the Craft or Master (which were not separated as far as ceremony). Concerning this ritual he says, “It does seem likely that the ceremony of Initiation or Passing would have been done in a room aside, while catechisms or lectures were given at the festive board or when there was no Candidate.”<sup>15</sup>

Distinguished researcher and Masonic lecturer, Harry Carr of England, compiled a book titled, *“Six Hundred Years of Ritual”* which was a collection of his many research papers published in *Ars Quatuor Coronati*. He argues that the history of Freemasonry began with the masonic trade organizations which began about the year 1356. In 1390 we find the earliest evidence of a ceremony of admission though he argues this cannot have been for the apprentice or entered apprentice and must have been for a fellow of craft, or for a man fully trained, though there is no evidence in the Old Charges. This, he reasons was because apprentices simply had no standing and were mere chattel or property. He also reminds us that as a researcher the issue of discovery is hindered by the fact that hand-written or printed compilation of a ritual would be in violation of the mason’s oath.

He then gives the following order of events: The earliest evidence of the practice of two degrees is in the 1598 minutes of two Scottish Lodges (Harleian MS) *“There is sen’ell words and signs of a free Mason to be revailed to you...not to revaille the same in the bears of any person but to the M” & fellows...*<sup>16</sup>

First mention of a Mason’s word is found in the 1696 Edinburgh Register House Manuscript titled “Form of Giving the Mason Word.” This is development is significant as he claims it would be the manner of initiating a mason and was corroborated in the Chetwode Crawley MS, 1700 and Kevan MS, 1714.<sup>17</sup>

His research indicates that it took about three years of indenture for a craftsman to be an entered apprentice which would be followed by a ceremony for admission as a master mason or ‘fellow craft’ (the original title of the of 2nd degree). This ceremony would include putting the candidate on his knees with some kind of ceremony to frighten him using a sword, after which he would be required to take up the book (Bible) and take the following oath:

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<sup>14</sup> TheOldCharges.com (accessed 09-10-2024)

<sup>15</sup> Martin Gandoff, *Over Three Hundred Years of Masonic Ritual*, Lewis Masonic, 2017, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Gandoff, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Gandoff, 6.

*“By god himself you shall answer to god when you shall stand naked before him, at the great day, you shall not reveal any part of what you shall hear or see at this time whither by word nor write nor put it in wryte at any time nor draw it with the point of a sword, or any other instrument upon the snow or sand, nor shall you speak of it but with an entered mason, so help you god.”*

Taken outside the door, he would then be taught the sign, postures and word(s) of entry – these are then given to the master and brethren under penalty of ‘no less pain than cutting of my throat’ - then there would follow the ritual of “entrusting” or passing the word to all the brethren up to Master. Two passwords were given for the entered apprentice, the pillar names B and J.<sup>18</sup>

He concludes by saying, “It seems very likely, as we have already said, that the ceremonial part was probably quite short – not a lot more than a prayer, an oath (obligation) and the giving of various secrets.<sup>19</sup> From this history of the operative craft we can see many elements that were incorporated into the speculative masonry we know today but as for the ritual we would need much more time to see its development and exact practice.

In the continuing development of the Craft, ritual evidence seems to show that the third degree is solely a creation of speculative masonry somewhere after 1725 with its foremost masonic myth – the legend of Hiram Abiff. Notably, the first mention of a Third Degree is found in the minutes of a Scottish Lodge Dumbarton Kilwinning, now No. 18 on 29 January 1726. *Masonry Dissected* would be the first masonic exposure published in England in 1730 by Samuel Prichard and for the first time, describes a system of three degrees and their catechisms but again little ritual.<sup>20</sup>

Historically the organization of modern Freemasonry began with what some have called the Great Revival of June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1717, St. John the Baptist’s Feast Day. This was when four London lodges formed the Grand Lodge of London, later known as the Grand Lodge of England, and still later the Premier Grand Lodge or United Grand Lodge of England. By 1723 they adopted, upon the recommendation of the Committee of Fourteen, the first Masonic Constitution. What is particularly significant for our discussion and obviously intended was the theme of the first article of that constitution titled “OF RELIGION”. It opened Freemasonry to non-Christians codifying toleration as a chief tenet of the Craft. Furthermore, article 6 paragraph 2 would cement this by forbidding the discussion of “politics and religion” in the Lodge. For the first time, Jews, Muslims, Catholics and even Deists could not be excluded from becoming members of the lodge. Thus, emboldened by Enlightenment principles Freemasonry saw the necessity to allow reason and rationality to prevail in a world of diverse sects and creeds keeping true to only a couple of core religious principles -- belief in God and conduct which promoted fraternal bonding, moral behavior and the expectation of eternal rewards.

This movement away from its historic Christian roots, among other issues, would ultimately set into motion fallout that would result in what is called The Great Schism with formation of competing Grand Lodges. One was the so-called Moderns (1717) and the another who styled themselves as Ancients (1751). A reconciliation would not be accomplished until December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1813, when two aristocratic brothers, one the leader of the Moderns (Duke of Sussex) and the other of the Ancients (Duke of Kent), would agree to form the United Grand Lodge of England after reconciliation talks that began in 1809.

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<sup>18</sup> (Harry Carr, *Six Hundred Years of Craft Ritual*, Lewis Masonic, 1984, 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Harry Carr, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Gandoff, 1.

Concerning the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England (1813), Trevor Stewart has written: “...the new United Grand Lodge never prescribed a single ritual nor a body of doctrine that every subscribing member was expected to adhere to. It has never even defined what are ‘the landmarks of the Order’. Such matters were left to the discretion of individual brethren, each one of whom was supposed to be engaged on his individual ‘pilgrimage’ from being metaphorically a Rough Ashlar to being a Perfect Ashlar. Besides, each member was earnestly enjoined not to disturb the peace, love and harmony of [his] lodge which ‘should at all times characterize Freemasonry.’”<sup>21</sup> Thus, even to this day, England has 12, 22, 30, 50<sup>22</sup> or more different rituals worked depending on who is counting.

Of this pivotal moment in our Fraternity, Joseph Fort Newton would write: “In the Lodge of Reconciliation, in 1813, the universal religious character of the Craft was finally affirmed, and the last definite trace of dogmatic theological influence vanished from our Fraternity – (adding) let us hope forever.”<sup>23</sup>

## SHAPERS OF RITUAL

For students of ritual, during this chaotic period from 1751 to 1813, one name comes forward as the most significant contributor. That is William Preston (1742-1818) a Scottish author, editor and lecturer. In 1760 he moved to London and started a distinguished career with the printer William Strahan. He became a Freemason, instituting a system of lectures of instruction, and publishing *Illustrations of Masonry*, which ran to several editions.<sup>24</sup> It is from Preston that we get the beautiful and poetic symbolism of our degree lectures. This was during the formative years of our Craft when the lectures composed the most significant and central work of the ritual.

Looking back, some time prior to 1731 we can trace the development of Freemasonry coming to America at a time when English ritual was in an early process of formation. Colonial America would not receive Masonry from one central source. but from several; nor would we obtain it complete. Several different localities, (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia) received Freemasonry England and from them our forms and ceremonies radiated to other sections of the expanding colonies. The Great Schism in England would result in two Grand Lodges each with its own rituals. American rituals would sometimes lean to one, sometimes to the other, and often to both. The literal ritualism of today would be a comparatively modern development; and "mouth to ear" in the early days meant nothing more than the giving of information, not transmitting it in a set form of words. Most Grand Lodges were formed by a union of members from various lodges, many of which received their ritual from different sources, with the result that the ritual finally adopted is a combination of several. We must also acknowledge that Grand Lodges have not infrequently changed, added to and taken from their own rituals, either as matter of legislation or by the easier course (in early days) of adopting with little or no question the variations suggested by well-meaning ritualists, Grand Lecturers, Custodians of the Work, ritual committees and so forth. As a Short Talk bulletin on ritual (January 1934) says, some of these, unfortunately, had little or no Masonic

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<sup>21</sup> Trevor Stewart, *Looking Back, Looking Forward*, Septentrione Books, 2012, 81.

<sup>22</sup> <https://dr-david-harrison.com/freemasonry/the-rituals-of-freemasonry-part-1/> (accessed June 24, 2024)

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, *The Religion of Masonry*, 15-16.

<sup>24</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Preston\\_\(Freemason\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Preston_(Freemason)) (Accessed 09-10-2024)

background, and changed and altered, added and subtracted with no better reason than "this seems much better to us!"<sup>25</sup>

Today there are certain fundamentals in every one of the fifty-one Grand Jurisdictions of the United States. In part, this is because of an American bookbinder, composer, and ritualist, Thomas Smith Webb (1771-1819). Webb was recognized as a Masonic teacher and felt compelled to standardize the competing rituals in America.<sup>26</sup> Using and modifying the lectures of Preston he added ritual form, implements, and symbolism to standardize the Craft degrees. Thus, all American Lodges have a Master and two Wardens, a Secretary and Treasurer, an Alter with the V.S.L. and the other Great Lights, three degrees; unanimous ballot required; make Masons only of men; have the same Substitute Word given in the same way; are tiled and have a ceremony of opening and closing. To some extent all dramatize and exemplify the master's degree, although the amount of drama and exemplification can differ widely.

Beyond these and a few other simple essentials there are wide variations. Aprons are worn one way in one degree in one Jurisdiction and another way in the same degree in another. Some Jurisdictions have more officers in a Lodge than others. In some jurisdictions lodges open and close on the Master Mason's degree; others on the First degree; others only in the degree which is to be "worked." Lesser Lights are grouped closely about the Altar, in the stations of the Master and Wardens. In some Lodges the Immediate Past Master plays an important part, as in England. Other Lodges do not know him. Some Lodges have Inner Guards and two Masters of Ceremonies — others will have none. Dividing, lettering, syllabing words of each degree are almost as various in practice as the jurisdictions. Obligations show certain close similarities in some requirements; but what is a part of the obligation in one jurisdiction may be merely an admonition in another, and "vice versa."<sup>27</sup>

## **SCRIPTURE AND RITUAL**

All this brings us to the use of Scripture in our three Craft Degrees.

Using the Webb-Preston work, which is common to most Grand Lodges in the United States, a candidate for masonry in the opening degree will be prayed for, hear the name of God referenced 18 times, the Bible twice, and hear the names of the Holy Saints John four times. A Bible or Volume of Sacred Law will be on the altar and open to Psalm 133. In the Tracing Board lectures which will follow, he will hear over 20 Biblical references from the Old and New Testaments, together with phrases taken from the Book of Common Prayer (of the Anglican Church). As he progresses through additional degrees, he will hear more and more Biblical quotations and most of the secret words he will be taught will come from the Bible.<sup>28</sup>

It is not possible in this paper to reference all the passages from the Bible that are used in our ritual degrees. The reality is that most Masons are hearing some of these passages for the first time. Many of our younger masons simply do not have an active involvement in the Christian faith or a church to have been taught a history of the Bible, its characters or stories. Likewise, many

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<sup>25</sup> SHORT TALK BULLETIN INDEX Vol. XII No. 1 — January 1934, Ritual Differences

<sup>26</sup> <https://masonicshop.com/encyclopedia/topics/entry/?!=982>, (Accessed June 28, 2024)

<sup>27</sup> SHORT TALK BULLETIN INDEX Vol. XII No. 1 — January 1934, Ritual Differences

<sup>28</sup> Mike Nevelle, *Sacred Secrets: Freemasonry, the Bible and the Christian Faith*, The History Press, Cheltenham, England, 2012, 358.

masons never think to go back and study the Biblical references in the degrees or why they have been used beyond obvious literal interpretations.

A simple study finds the following references to these Bible terms in our three Craft Degrees. The Bible is referenced 19 times, God is found 74 times, Heaven is mentioned 28 times, the Saints John are referenced 14 times, the All-Seeing-Eye twice, along with God as Creator 8 times, Hiram Abiff 50 times but only in the third degree, and prayer is given or admonished 13 times. Freemasonry has come down to us to reveal and reverence the natural law that surrounds us in God's creation. We are taught it is resplendent in its geometric design and order all governed by the revealed laws found in God's Holy Word, the Bible. This is the foundation of Freemasonry's design and without it there could not be Freemasonry as we know it.

Some have wondered how many Christian references are found in our Craft lectures. Depending on which jurisdiction you live in you will find only one, as in Minnesota. This is an explanation during the third lecture of the Entered Apprentice degree when reference is made to the Mosaic pavement with a blazing star at its center. It is explained that it is "*commemorative of the star which appeared to guide the wise men to the east-to the place of our savior's nativity*" and which "*hieroglyphically represents Divine Providence.*" This comes directly out of Webb's *The Freemason's Monitor*<sup>29</sup> which borrowed it from a late 18<sup>th</sup> century ritual of Brother Thomas Dunkerley, a contemporary of William Preston. Henry Pirtle author of the *New Kentucky Monitor (Revised)* which is followed by many Kentucky lodges, for example, never references the Christian story of Jesus' birth and only emphasizes the significance of Divine Providence in our lives.<sup>30</sup> This is a typical example of how ritual instruction can vary between Grand Lodges.

Let us turn now to the scripture passages spoken during the circumambulation rite in American Masonic Craft degrees. A Volume of Sacred Law (V.S.L) is required to be on the altar in the center of the Lodge and is generally the 1611 edition of the Authorized or King James' Version of the Holy Bible. It must be open while the lodge is at work, but few jurisdictions specify what page or portion of holy scripture is required to be read. Most common is Psalm 133 for the Entered Apprentice Degree, Amos 7:7-8 for the Fellowcraft Degree, and Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 for the Master Mason Degree. These are also the Biblical passages found in Webb's *The Freemasons Monitor* and with few exceptions used in all regular masonic lodges in the United States.

Generally, in Great Britain the degree scriptures are: Ruth 4:7 (or Ruth 2:10-11 – about God's provision, protection and promise or I Kings 6:8 – the sacrifice of Isaac) for the Entered Apprentice Degree. Judges 12:6 (or 2 Chronicles 3:17 – the fullness of God's strength, blessing and stability in the Temple) are used for the Fellowcraft Degree, and 1 Kings 7:13-14 (or Isaiah 9:2, Psalm 133:1, Amos 5:25-26 – God rejects worship that is not sincere and accompanied by social justice, or 2 Chronicles 6:14-15 – about God's faithfulness and covenant, and obedience to His commandments) for the Master Mason Degree.<sup>31 32</sup>

For a few moments let's look at the three scripture passages used in most American jurisdictions. Psalm 133 for the Entered Apprentice degree:

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Smith Webb, *The Freemason's Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry*, R.W. Carroll & Co., Publishers, Cincinnati, OH, 1867, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Pirtle, *New Kentucky Monitor (Revised)*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> SHORT TALK BULLETIN – Vol. 9, No. 12, December 1931

<sup>32</sup> <https://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/scripture.html> (accessed September 10, 2024)



**133 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! <sup>2</sup> It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; <sup>3</sup> As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.**

As we will discover, each of the Scriptures used in the degrees has a direct association with its core teaching or meaning. The obvious use of this passage from the Psalms is to acknowledge that the lodge is a place for the blessing of harmony and unity through fraternity or true brotherhood. As the Senior Warden says concerning his responsibilities, *“to see that no go away dissatisfied, harmony being the strength and support of all societies more especially of ours.”*

As we continue to read, “dew” is nature’s blessing especially in lands where rain is precious. The “dew of Hermon” we are told was proverbially heavy. “Precious ointment” was poured on the heads of those who were specially chosen or honored in Israel for priestly or kingly positions. A significant honor was paid Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, as the quantity was so great in anointing him as High priest that it ran down his beard all the way to the hems of his garments. All this points to a revealed truth that real brotherhood, harmony, blessing and chosenness in God’s eyes commend a special blessing. As the Psalmist so beautifully states *“even life for evermore.”* Is this not the deeply held desire of every human being and the great religious truth that Freemasonry teaches?

Turning to the Fellowcraft degree the candidate hears these words from Amos 7:7-8 as he circumambulates twice about the altar:

**7 Thus he shewed me: and behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand.**

**8 And the Lord said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumbline. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them anymore.**

It is impossible to be in the building trades without knowledge of how to use a plumb. In ancient craft masonry the plumb was an essential tool used by operative masons in the construction of buildings. This instrument, typically fashioned out of wood or metal with a string and weight attached, was crucial in ensuring that structures were erected in a perpendicular fashion. As Speculative Freemasonry emerged, this emblem of a builder’s workmanship transformed into a powerful symbolic instrument to teach moral lessons. The plumb thus became one of the working tools of a Fellow Craft and a vital symbol in Masonic teaching.<sup>33</sup>

It is the Worshipful Master who directs us to the meaning of the plumb when he says, *“the Plumb admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations before God and man, squaring our actions by the square of virtue, and remembering that we are traveling upon the level of time, to that undiscovered country, from whose born no traveler returns.”* In Masonic tradition the plumb teaches each man the value of moral uprightness, exemplifying the virtues of truth, justice, and integrity. When applied to human

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.thesquaremagazine.com/mag/article/202307the-plumb-masonic-symbolism/> (accessed September 5, 2024)

conduct, the plumb emphasizes the importance of leading a life that adheres to the highest moral principles, unwavering in the face of adversity or temptation.<sup>34</sup>

Symbolically the plumb is an instrument representing the Junior Warden. His principal role is to monitor behavior in the lodge. His responsibility is to observe the conduct of lodge members and ensure that they adhere to Masonic laws and the teachings of Freemasonry. This includes promoting harmony, maintaining decorum during meetings, and intervening if a member's behavior or actions are contrary to the fraternity's values.

Most Masons will not be familiar with the prophet Amos (760-750 B.C.E). His book is one of the smallest of the Twelve Minor Prophets of the Bible. He was a herdsman by trade called by God to speak to the people of Israel with a message of social justice. He reminded the people that God is just and impartial and will judge not only the nations but also his own people for their life of ease and apathy amid human suffering. This applies to a Masons conduct in and out of the lodge, in that it must reflect an uprightness of moral character and conduct that is beyond reproach.

Masonry teaches another religious truth that each Mason must build so that his work stands the test of God's judgment. Has it promoted brotherly love, relief and truth? Will his plumbline show he has done good work, true work, square work and proved himself eager to present himself before God, a workman who has no cause to be ashamed?

Last, we come to a passage in Scripture read during the circumambulation of the Third degree while going three times about the altar, Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. Often cited by Masons as representing the culmination of life, with old age and death, it seems to represent well the moral teaching of the Third degree. No doubt it has led many Masons to conclude that the three degrees of Masonry are ages and stages of life: youth, manhood, and old age. You will find, however, no specific teaching in Masonry to come to this progression of the degrees.

**12 Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;**

**<sup>2</sup>While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:**

**<sup>3</sup>In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,**

**<sup>4</sup>And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;**

**<sup>5</sup>Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:**

**<sup>6</sup>Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.**

**<sup>7</sup>Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.**

There can be little doubt that Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 speaks of the aging process, the decline of physical abilities, and the inevitable death of the body. These themes are echoed in the Masonic

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ritual with the telling of the legend of Hiram Abiff, where the candidate is graphically reminded of the fleeting nature of life and the importance of using one's time on earth wisely to pursue the building of the spiritual temple of his life. The passage emphasizes the idea of remembering one's Creator before the days of trouble come. This can be interpreted as a reminder to live a virtuous life and to maintain a strong connection with one's spiritual beliefs.

The poetic metaphors of these passages are often missed by many Masons.

(2) *"While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened,* (refers to blindness or extreme nearsightedness) *nor the clouds return after the rain* (the continuation of poor sight, even after much weeping):

(3) *"In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,* (muscles suffer weakness and tremors) *and the strong men shall bow themselves* (legs become bowed with age), *and the grinders cease because they are few,* (which are the teeth) *and those that look out of the windows be darkened,* (eyes grown dim)

(4) *And the doors shall be shut in the streets,*(which are the lips) *when the sound of the grinding is low* (the ears cannot hear) *and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,* (insomnia at any little disturbance) *and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low* (when the vocal cords lose their timbral and have a cracking voice);

5 *Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high* (the fear of heights), *and fears shall be in the way,* *and the almond tree shall flourish* (grey hair comes), *and the grasshopper shall be a burden* (any weight becomes a burden), *and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home,* *and the mourners go about the streets:*

6 *Or ever the silver cord be loosed* (the spinal cord), *or the golden bowl be broken* (the skull), *or the pitcher be broken at the fountain* (failing heart), *or the wheel broken at the cistern* (referencing the kidneys, bladder and prostate gland).

Overall, Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 conveys the profound philosophical and moral teachings of the Third Degree about the nature of existence, the passage of time, and the importance of spiritual preparation for the inevitable end of life. Can there be any more significant teaching or encouragement to live a life with purpose and the knowledge of our destiny in mind while we live? Such is the great and lasting impression Freemasonry wants to leave on every member of our Craft.

I will end this paper on "Religion, Freemasonry, and Scripture: Pivotal Moments in our History" with the intent that it is the foundation of a second paper to be presented at the William O. Ware Lodge of Research in November.

There is, perhaps, no finer summation of the noble purposes of Freemasonry and its relationship to religion than the Preamble to the Grand Lodge of New York from its Constitution and Laws. It beautifully reminds us to take pride in our Craft which is religion's handmaiden and mankind's temple of brotherhood.

**"There is one God, the Father of all men."**

**"The Holy Bible is the Great Light in Masonry, and the rule and guide for faith and practice."**

**"Man is immortal."**

**"Character determines destiny."**

**"Love of man is, next to love of God, man's first duty."**

**"Prayer, communion of man with God, is helpful."**

**"Masonry teaches man to practice charity and benevolence, to protect chastity, to respect the ties of blood and friendship, to adopt the principles and revere the ordinances of Religion, to assist the feeble, guide the blind, raise up the downtrodden, shelter the orphan,**

**guard the Altar; support the Government, inculcate morality, promote learning, love man, fear God, implore His mercy and hope for happiness.”<sup>35</sup>**

In fraternitate et caritate,  
Reverend Terry L. Tilton, PGM-MN, FPS

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, *The Religion of Freemasonry An Interpretation*, Southern Publishers Inc., Kingsport, TN, 1927, 4.