



Grand Lodge of Wisconsin – Masonic Study Series
Volume 1, Issue 6
February, 2016

“The Symbolism of the Ruffians”

Lodge Presentation:

The following short article is written with the intention to be read within an open Lodge, or in fellowship, to all the members in attendance. This article is appropriate to be presented to all Master Masons. NO Entered Apprentice or Fellowcraft Masons should be present when this topic is presented. Following this article is a list of discussion questions which should be presented immediately following the presentation of the article.

The Symbolism of the Ruffians

The exact origins of the second section of the Master Mason degree are shrouded in mystery. It is commonly accepted that this section, the Hiramic legend, was first introduced to Freemasonry in the 18th century, during the Age of Enlightenment. Whatever the specific origins of the second section of this degree are, the lessons taught within are as important to the life of a Freemason as any in our ritual. In fact, the lessons taught in this section are of such importance that Brother Albert Mackey included it in his list of the “Ancient Landmarks” of Freemasonry.

I do not intend to detract from any of the lessons taught in the second section of this degree, or from how these individual lessons work together to communicate the essence of Freemasonry. For the purpose of this article I am going to focus on one part of this section, the ruffians, more specifically what they symbolize.

Like the second section of the degree itself, the origins of the ruffians are also unknown. Many Masonic and historical scholars have tried to identify their origins: whether they are historical figures lost to the ages or fictional characters created to convey a set of specific lessons. There are many excellent papers written on the etymology of the word “ruffian”, their origins and the meanings of their individual names. All are excellent papers that I recommend to every Mason, but this is beyond the scope of our discussion here.

As we consider what the ruffians symbolize, it is easy to look no further than the atrocity of their crime. The crime these three brothers conspired to commit, to unlawfully obtain the secrets they were not deserving of, sheds some light on the significance of their presence in our ritual.

To fully understand their significance, I believe we need to look at their specific actions but first we need to remember that Hiram Abiff symbolizes the human soul. The work that he is engaged with in our ritual, the construction of King Solomon’s temple, symbolizes the work each Mason is engaged in: the construction of our own spiritual temple.



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When we contemplate Hiram’s significance, the symbolism and significance of the ruffian’s actions become clear. Their actions, besides being the implements with which they carry out their horrid conspiracy, I believe have a deeper meaning. Together, through their actions the ruffians conspire to destroy liberty.

The first action strikes at the throat and our freedom of speech: or our freedom to communicate our opinions and ideas without fear of persecution or censorship. The second strikes at that heart and our freedom of conscience: our freedom of religious choice and morality, the source of that Divine Light that guides us. The third strikes at the head and our freedom of thought: our freedom to hold a thought or viewpoint independent of other’s viewpoints.

These freedoms are among those that were identified by the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment as being freedoms each man is born with. Protecting these freedoms and educating the population were among the goals of the philosophers during the Age of Enlightenment. Our Brother Albert Pike identified these ruffians as the greatest enemies of individual welfare and social progress. As he put it: “the ruffians represent the principals of absolute monarchy, the fixed and rigid dogma of the church and the mob-minded mentality prevalent during this time.” They work together to destroy liberty, without which no progress can be made¹.

As our ritual teaches us, the ruffians with their actions prevented Hiram from completing his work on Solomon’s temple, so too would the loss of our freedom of speech, conscience and thought cause our work on our spiritual temple to come to an untimely end.

In the face of these ruffians, Hiram kept the principals of Freemasonry in his heart. In imitation of his example, so to must we keep the principals of Freemasonry in our hearts in the face of our symbolic ruffians and their attacks. Not only protecting our opinions, our consciences and our thoughts against those who may seek to influence them for their own personal benefit, but also ensuring that the mysteries of Freemasonry remain unimpaired for future generations of Masons.

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Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons of Wisconsin

¹SHORT TALK BULLETIN - Vol.V September, 1927 No.9.



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Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions are written to be presented immediately following the presentation of the topic above. They are designed to promote thought and engage all the members that are present in conversation. Take care that the presentation of the topic and the discussion questions does not exceed 30 minutes. The presenter can present any part of the questions below, or any additional questions, he feels is appropriate.

- The Age of Enlightenment had a large impact on Freemasonry. What are some of the other ways it impacted our craft?
- The Age of Enlightenment not only impacted the philosophy of Freemasonry, many notable Freemasons came from this period as well. Who were some of them?
- The Hiramic legend conveys many important lessons to Masons. What are some of the others lessons in that section of the degree?
- What are some of the other theories of the origins of the second section of the degree?
- What is the definition of the Ancient Landmarks of Freemasonry?
- The Hiramic legend is one of Mackey's Ancient Landmarks, what are some of the other Ancient Landmarks?
- Why would the Hiramic legend be considered an Ancient Landmark?
- How would the loss of our freedom of speech, conscience and thought affect our works as Freemasons?