

# **Notes on Symbolism**

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# NOTES ON SYMBOLISM

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## Introduction

"To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heav'n in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour."—(William Blake.)

"The thoughts of all the greatest and wisest men have been expressed through mythology."—(John Ruskin.)

"A myth is a narrative framed for the purpose of expressing some general truth. A symbol is a silent myth, which impresses the truth which it conveys, not by successive stages, but at once throws together significant images of some truth."—(Wm. Fleming.)

"In a symbol there is concealment and yet revelation, silence and speech acting together, some embodiment and revelation of the infinite, made to blend itself with the finite, to stand visible and, as it were, attainable there."—(Thos. Carlyle.)

"The first learning of the world consisted chiefly of symbols. The wisdom of the Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Jews, of Zoroaster, Sanchoniathon, Pherecydds, Cyrus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and all of the ancients that is come to our land, is symbolic."—(Dr. Wm. Stukeley.)

"Symbolic representation of things sacred were coeval with religion itself as a system of doctrine appealing to sense, and have accompanied its transmission to ourselves from the earliest known period of monumental history."—(H. C. Barlow.)

"In the absence of a written language or form of expression capable of conveying abstract ideas, we can readily comprehend the necessity, among a primitive people, of a symbolic system."—(E. G. Squir.)

"The study of Freemasonry is essentially a study of symbolism because Freemasonry teaches by symbolism only. Any inquiry, therefore, into the teachings of Freemasonry, should be preceded by a comprehensive investigation of the nature of symbolism in general, its origin and its peculiar characteristics."—(M. R. Grant.)

## NOTES ON SYMBOLISM

The scarcity of literature dealing with symbolism seems strange when we consider the importance of symbolism and how much it influences our present life, as well as the significant function it fulfilled in the development of human thought and culture.

Albert G. Mackey and Oliver D. Street have both written works on the subject of Masonic symbolism which should be more extensively read. Albert Pike was a profound scholar of symbolism, but unfortunately only published limited editions of his "Lectures on Symbolism." All these talented brethren have warned us against the errors into which we are liable to fall by either neglecting to give symbols the spiritual significance they deserve, or by trying to give them forced interpretations.

W. H. Rylands, a distinguished brother, also warns us, saying:

"Symbolism is always a difficult affair as everyone knows or at least ought to know. When once fairly launched on the subject, it often becomes an avalanche or torrent which may carry one away into the open sea or more than empty space. On few questions has more rubbish been written than that of symbols and symbolism. It is a happy hunting ground for those who, guided by no sort of system or rule, ruled only by their own sweet will, loved to allow their fancies and imaginations to run wild. Interpretations are given which have no other foundation than the disordered brain of the writer, and when proof or anything approaching a definite statement is required, symbols are confused with metaphors and we are involved in a further maze of follies and wild fancies."

While the foregoing advice is timely and needs to be always considered, we must also consider the equally important admonition of Albert Pike, who says:

"The symbolism of Masonry is the soul of Masonry. Every symbol of a lodge is a religious teacher, the mute teacher also of morals and



philosophy. It is in its ancient symbols and in the knowledge of their true meanings that the preeminence of Freemasonry over all other orders consists. In other respects, some of them may compete with it, rival it, perhaps even excel it; but by its symbols it will reign without a peer when it learns again what its symbols mean, and that each is the embodiment of some great, old, rare truth." And again, that "to translate the symbols into the trivial and commonplace is the blundering of mediocrity."

Freemasonry is the custodian of symbolism and we can never fully comprehend the depth of its philosophy or the height of its spiritual significance without some knowledge of the use of symbols in past ages.

Three theories have been advanced for the probable origin of Masonic symbolism. First—it has come down from times ante-dating the Grand Lodge era. Second—it was formulated by the brethren of the Grand Lodge about 1717. Third—it has been an evolution, which is still going on.

If Freemasonry is really a system of symbolic teaching, which is generally conceded; and if this symbolism was undergoing a process of decay in the time immediately preceding the Grand Lodge era as R. F. Gould thinks probable, we may well seek for the earliest recorded use of symbols in general and architectural and geometrical symbols in particular as possible aids to a better understanding of their importance and utility.

The use of tools and implements of architecture as symbols, and a traditional history distinguish the so-called operative Freemasons of the era preceding the revival in 1717 from the many guilds of other crafts; and it is noteworthy that architectural and geometrical symbols are much more in evidence as moral and spiritual teachers than any other class of symbols. We may also note their use many centuries ago, in much the same way as Freemasonry uses them today.

"Going then to the records we possess of the earliest historic times in China, I find clear evidence of the existence of a mystic faith expressed in allegorical form, and illustrated, as with us, by symbols. The secrets of this faith were orally transmitted, the chiefs alone pretending to have full knowledge of them. I find, moreover, that in these earliest ages this faith took a Masonic form, the secrets being recorded in symbolic buildings like the Tabernacle Moses put up in the desert, and the Temple his



successor, Solomon, built in Jerusalem; that the various offices in the hierarchy of this religion were distinguished by the symbolic jewels held by them during their terms of office, and that, as with us, at the rites of their religion they wore leather aprons, such as have come down to us, marked with the insignia of their rank. I find in the earliest works that have come down to us the square and compasses, and that they regulated their lives thereby. Then, as now, the square and compasses were considered to exemplify the secrets and principles of true propriety. Finally, I find one of the most ancient names by which the Deity is spoken of in China as that of the First Builder, or as Masons say, the Great Architect of the Universe.

"The Mysteries of this ancient Faith have now become lost, or at best obscured, though attempts at a revival may be traced in the proceedings of existing brotherhoods, whose various rituals and signs are supposed to be in some measure founded on ancient rites and symbols which have been handed down from the earliest ages.

"From time immemorial we find the square and compasses used by the Chinese writers, either together or separately, to symbolize precisely the same phases of moral conduct as in our own system of Freemasonry. It has ever been accepted as a physical axiom in China that 'Heaven is round, Earth is square'; and among the relics of the nature worship of old, we find the altar of Heaven at Peking round, while the altar of Earth is square. By the marriage of Heaven and Earth, the conjunction of the circle and the square, the Chinese believe that all things were produced and subsequently distributed, each according to its own proper function. And such is, in my opinion, the undoubted origin of the terms 'square and compasses' as figuratively applied to human conduct by the earliest ancestors of the Chinese people."

Let us not imagine that symbols have become obsolete, or that they are not commonly used in present everyday life. The symbols used by our remote ancestors were in many cases their only method of conveying abstract thought, while modern invention and education has in a pronounced manner supplemented them with facilities for development which divert our conscious realization of the importance of symbols.

Do we doubt the power of symbols? If so, let us take those we use daily and analyze their power over our mental processes. The emblem "\$" signifies dollars. As a symbol it brings us to a clear consciousness of financial affairs. We cannot take this sign (\$) and buy anything with it but if we have that which it symbolizes we are able to procure equivalent values in necessities and luxuries. As a symbol it only partially affects our emotional nature, and is given only because it is so generally used.



The flag of our country, Old Glory, is an emblem of the government of the United States of America. As a symbol it brings vividly into our mind—yes, into our hearts and souls—the high ideals which made the United States of America possible. As a symbol of the high ideals of Liberty and Equality it keeps us eager to maintain and promote those ideals. For a brief moment reflect on the emotions which have vibrated your whole body as you gazed at this symbol of Equality and Liberty, and you cannot deny the power of a symbol. As a physical object it is nothing but cloth. The colors are used in many ways. To be sure the arrangement is very beautiful and from an artistic viewpoint we can be justly proud of our flag; but its real power lies in the wonderful things it symbolizes.

Likewise, let us consider the Cross. To the Christian the Cross is a continual reminder of the great law of Love which Christianity teaches. To the Christian the Cross must ever symbolize that Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man which the Master taught.

The flag as a symbol of Equality and Liberty, which are the foundation stones on which our country rests, and the Cross, which symbolizes Divine Love, are only partially understood by the great majority. To comprehend their full significance it is necessary to understand how political equality and liberty developed, and study the religious aspirations of humanity. To express a sentiment of patriotism without a real conception of the great principles which the flag symbolizes, or profess to be a Christian and fail to love God with all your heart and soul and your neighbor as yourself, is to understand only partially the things they symbolize. So, too, with the square and compasses and other pertinent symbols of Freemasonry. They have deep significance and the power to raise the brother from the prevailing conceptions of social relationship to the highest ideals of Brotherhood. Symbols cannot make any impression on the human mind, except by desire and consent. Freedom of action and even speech is sometimes restrained or prohibited, but freedom of thought is something that is inviolable. We choose whether to permit a symbol to influence us and to what extent.



The flag and the cross are the most potent symbols relating to political and religious thought on this continent, but they are not the only means of teaching these things. In Freemasonry, however, symbols are the very essence of the whole system. Without the symbols it would be of no more value than the many other fraternal societies which aim to promote the welfare of humanity. It is by these symbols and a proper understanding of their use in our lives that Freemasonry excels. To be a member of a Masonic Lodge and not understand its symbolism is as inconsistent as to be a citizen and not understand the principles of government.

The object of the present essay is to direct attention to several of the more important symbols of antiquity, as it is only by knowledge of what they have meant to people of the past that we can fully understand the general system of symbolism of which Freemasonry is custodian.

The word symbol comes from a Greek word meaning "a sign by which one knows a thing." In its general use it is a visible sign of an idea or quality of another subject. In a religious and moral or Masonic sense, it is a sign with a moral or spiritual significance.

Symbols, emblems and types are very commonly used as synonymous, but must be considered as distinct in any study of symbolic teaching. An emblem is a representation of an idea by a visible object. A type is more strictly speaking one thing which is a model for another, such as the tabernacle was a model, or type, of King Solomon's Temple.

"Emblems, symbols and types all have this in common: they are the representatives of something else for which they stand. Emblems and symbols often differ only in their mode of application; thus the palm-branch is an emblem of Victory, but taken in a Christian sense, it is a symbol, significant of the victory of our faith, and is given to all Christian martyrs who have thus overcome death. The anchor may be a mere emblem of hope, but when it is put for the hope of a Christian it becomes a symbol. So, also, the equilateral triangle may be nothing more than the emblem of three united in one; but, as significant of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is a symbol of the highest order.



"A symbol is of the highest order when it expresses a religious dogma or philosophical doctrine, but of the lowest when it is put for a received fact, either real or legendary. Thus the anchor as a symbol of St. Clement is of the lowest order; and so are all those particular symbols of saints by which they are distinguished from one another; as the sword of St. Paul, the keys of St. Peter, the knife of St. Bartholomew, the tower of St. Barbara, etc."—(Essays on Symbolism—H. C. Barlow.)

The Christian Church is possessor of a wealth of the most impressive symbolism. The Sacraments are all symbolism of the highest type, but alas, as in Freemasonry, its votaries too often go through the forms and ceremonies with very little conception of their full significance. The subjects of the mediaeval artists were originally symbolical, but are now simply conventional with a large majority. The Virgin and Child was introduced as a symbol of those holding the orthodox faith after the Council of Ephesus had condemned the Nestorians in A. D. 431. Barlow tells us, "The dogma of the Mother of God\* was of Egyptian origin; it was brought in, along with the worship of Madonna, by Cyril and his monks of Alexandra, in the fifth century. The earliest representations of the Madonna and Child have quite a Greco-Egyptian character, and there is little doubt that Isis nursing Horus was the origin of them all. The Chinese also recognize this old pagan notion in Tienhow, the Queen of Heaven, nursing her infant Son, who is usually represented holding a lotus-bud as the symbol of the new birth."

Any study of the highest types of symbols, or those affecting the moral and religious nature should embrace considerable knowledge of all the religions of antiquity. In such a study we should endeavor to find those basic principles which are common to all religions, and to acquire as much as possible the viewpoint of those primitive people among whom symbols were first used.

\* NOTE: In a recent work entitled "The Celestial Ship of the North," a vast accumulation of material bearing on the primitive conceptions of a divine Mother was collected. There are many traditions which point to this Celestial Ship of the North as being symbolized by the great Bear, or Ursa Major. Miss Zelia Nuttall in her archaeological work for Harvard University has brought out the theory with much evidence in its favor that it was from this group of stars that the Swastika was originally derived. The revolution of these stars around the Pole Star annually with one spoke of an imaginary wheel at equal angles at the four seasons of the year, is, according to her theory, symbolized by the Swastika.



The use of symbols is prehistoric, because when man had developed to a point where he recorded his actions and thoughts he was far advanced. The first language of primitive man was undoubtedly a sign language. Spoken language developed very slowly. The first language was probably limited to things concerning physical acts and desires, such as desire for food, shelter, clothing, and to express fear and pain, joy and happiness.

Sustenance and reproduction are the motive forces which actuate physical man. His mental, moral and spiritual nature are dependent on the leisure he may find from the necessities nature has imposed. He has within him faculties which are seldom developed to their capacity.

As far back as records guide us, or traditions permit us to speculate, a limited number of men have held the highest ideals and helped their fellows to a better understanding of the mental, moral and spiritual phases of life.

A primitive shepherd tending his flocks on the plains of Chaldea gazed in amazement at the starry heavens and eventually discovered that the Sun, Moon and Stars had orderly and systematic movements. He saw the return of seasons and the wonderful reproduction of vegetable life and in his primitive way must have speculated on the cause. The first line which primitive man saw was a circle. It was the circle of the horizon. How long after he discovered this circle and tried to reproduce it in miniature by the aid of two sticks which eventually became our compasses must remain conjecture, but we may venture purely as a probability that the circle, line and square were the first geometrical figures used by man. It is probable that even before this he may have made crude pictures gradually evolved into a written language.

It required such a long period of time to develop both written and spoken language to convey abstract ideas that it is almost certain such ideas were originally expressed by symbols.



The records of pictographs in caves, inscriptions on monuments, vases, coins and tombs have given the information on which all writers on symbolism of antiquity have based their opinions.

The migration of symbols has followed the migration of peoples and commerce. Many symbols have been used on coins and thus in commerce the symbol has been transplanted to places where its original significance was not understood.

Another symbol of great antiquity is the Phallus. The lingam and yoni of ancient India and the Crux Ansata of ancient Egypt are the most ancient of which we have knowledge. The reproductive principle in nature seems to have led primitive man to use this symbol as the most pertinent way of expressing his ideas of the Great Creator of the Universe. The ideas of propriety which make it so repugnant to us did not occur to primitive man.

"Nature to the early man was not brute matter, but a being invested with his own personality, and endowed with the same feelings, passions, and performing the same functions. He could only conceive the course of nature from the analogy to his own actions. By an easy illusion the functions of human nature were transferred to physical nature. Man not only attributed his own mind and feelings to the powers of nature, but also the functions of his nature generation, begetting reproduction, bringing forth; they became his ideas of cause and effect. To the Sun, the great fecundator, and the chief cause of awakening nature into life; to the Earth, the great recipient, in the bosom of which all things are produced, man attributed the same powers and modes of reproduction as in human nature. The human intellect being finite, man is incapable of imagining a personal god inseparable from the functions of human nature. Sex was given to them; the Sun or sky were considered the male, or active power; the Earth, the female or passive power. The sky was the fecundating and fertilizing power; the earth was looked upon as the mould of nature, and the recipient of seeds, the nurse of what was produced in its bosom. An analogy was suggested in the union of the male and female. These comparisons are found in ancient writers."—(Primitive Symbolism—H. M. Westropp.)

"The bright sky loves to penetrate the earth; the earth, on her part, aspires to the heavenly marriage. Rain falling from the watery sky impregnates the earth, and she produces for mortals pastures of the flocks, and the gifts of Ceres."—Aeschylus.)

"The sky appeared to men to perform the functions of a father, as the earth those of a mother. The sky was the father, for it cast seed into the bosom of the earth, which on receiving them became fruitful and brought forth, and was the mother."—(Plutarch.)



"Eminent scholars who have devoted themselves to the investigation of ancient cults, have shown to demonstration that the most primitive idea of God was that he consisted of a dual nature, masculine and feminine, and the connubial contact of this androgynous Deity gave birth to creation."—(Christian D. Ginsburgh, LL. D.)

Vast numbers of quotations might be made to further demonstrate the conclusions at which eminent scholars have arrived regarding the prevalence of this primitive belief and also showing that it was general among primitive people in every part of the world, even in the ancient civilizations of the western hemisphere.

All prominent writers on Symbolism have stressed the importance of phallic symbols in the religious and philosophies of primitive people. We feel that their importance has not been over-estimated and that among the early ancestors of our race this particular phase of nature's manifestations produced in their minds a reverence which it is hard for modern people to understand.

Primitive symbols were all very close to nature. The earliest pictographs were crude pictures of animals. Geometrical symbols, of which the Swastika, Cross, and Crux Ansata are the more important and interesting, were all closely allied to astrological symbols.

Twentieth century modes of life make most of us quite unconscious of nature and the great universe, except as we relax from the daily routine and seriously contemplate it. With our primitive ancestors it was just the reverse. He lived in a world that, while it was crude in modes of life as we know them, was simple and very close to nature. His very existence depended on his knowledge of nature. He must observe the sun, moon and stars and regulate his life by them. To him the sun actually did rule the day and the moon govern the night. In his crude way he started the study of astronomy which eventually become astrology in which we find a most complex system of governing influences. Constellations were named after mythical and fanciful characters, each of which had its particular influence on earthly affairs. Astrology and mythology are very intimately con-



nected and a very extended system of symbolism was developed. The zodiac with its 12 signs is the central figure of this system of symbolism, and although we are prone to ridicule astrology, it has been a most potent factor in the development of the human mind. Perhaps we do an injustice to the ancient astrologers by judging the ideas they expressed literally, when much of all the expression of the ancients was figurative.

Architecture was the first mechanical occupation of man. Early in his development he learned to build crude shelter for himself and soon after built alters for worship. He next built a temple, or house of God, and with the tools he used probably associated moral tenets. The first use of tools and implements of architecture as symbols of moral virtues is lost in antiquity. They are closely associated with religion and so, in fact, are all the symbols that have come down from the remote past. It was a religious sentiment that actuated their first use and the same sentiment that perpetuated their use. If we study them today from purely intellectual motives we may never understand them.

Every religious system has had a vast amount of symbolism in its forms and ceremonies. Much that was taught by this method has been lost to us.

Such symbols as the lion for strength, the ox for patience, the lily for purity, the plumb for rectitude, corn for nourishment, wine for refreshment and oil for joy are easily traced to quite a distant past; but there are many very important symbols that are not so easily disposed of.

The original significance of such symbols as the Circle, Triangle, Square, Swastika, Crux Ansata, Serpent, Lotus and many others is more problematical.

Mackenzie, in his "Migration of Symbols" has brought out a thought in clear outline which is well worthy of our attention:

"The early thinkers had formulated definite ideas regarding the world in which they lived long before they began to speculate regarding origins;



and when their minds soared into space, they carried into the Otherworld the familiar objects of everyday life. They did not imagine that the sun was carried across the sky in a boat like the Egyptian god Re, before boats were invented, or in a chariot, like the Hindu god Surya, before chariots came into use and horses were domesticated. Nor did they regard the heavens as the roof of the world-house which had been fashioned by a divine artisan before they had begun to build houses for themselves. The idea that there was a gate or door in the sky did not have origin until there were gates and doors on the earth.

"It should not be assumed in this connection, however, that the 'world-tree' of Egyptian, Hindu, Scandinavian and other mythologies was necessarily earlier than the posts or pillars of the cardinal points. The tree did not probably come into prominence before it had been defied and connected with the sky-goddess Nut.

"After the early artisans had constructed habitations for themselves, they imagined that the sky roof was supported by posts or pillars. The idea that there was but one pillar may go back to the time when the earliest tents were in use; the two pillars may have been first suggested by the fact that day has its entrance in the east and exit in the west. The four pillars were not introduced until man had discovered the four cardinal points.

"In Egypt, as we have seen, natural phenomena suggested to man the idea that certain influences emanated from the cardinal points. As has been indicated, hot blistering winds blow for a period from the south, and a cool reviving wind blows for a period from the north, heralding and therefore according to early belief, bringing the inundation which ushers in the season of coolness and fruitfulness. Certain deities were identified with these influences, and they came to be regarded as controllers of them.

"The early Egyptians saw Egypt in the sky. The 'Milky Way' issuing apparently from the region of the 'Imperishable stars' was the Celestial Nile, and the source of their own Nile. It was the river of night. The river of day flowed from east to west, and carried upon its breast the boat of the sun; before it carried this boat, it carried the earlier reed floats which were, according to Pyramid Text 1026, bound together by the 'four youths' of the horizon for the sun-god Re, and the dead Pharaoh."

The phenomena of nature were early associated with ideas of God and a future life. In Egypt the two most prominent forces of nature which the people observed by their beneficent effects on the crops were the sun and the Nile and these were soon personified and considered as gods. Late research seems to justify the charge that we have misinterpreted the word "gods" and that it was not intended to express the plurality of Deity. It is now thought that the original belief of those people was in a Supreme Being and intermediary beings, lesser than God, but greater than man. As lesser dignitaries, the sun, moon and other planets, and the charac-



ters of mythology which they later assumed, more nearly correspond to the saints of the Church in its most critical period.

Mythology and astrology are intimately connected with the development of thought, and it is plausible to assume that much of our symbolism had its origin in astrology.

To primitive men all existence was divided into two categories, heaven overhead and earth under foot, which is the foundation on which all mythology and cosmogonies are built. To the Israelite they appeared the works of Jehovah; to the Chinese they were the father and mother of all things the Yin and Yang. To the early Greeks they were the first divine beings, Uranos and Gaea.

As man gradually advanced from his primitive condition other aspects presented themselves to his mind, and he began to regard them in more detail, heaven as fructifying, lofty, male, and controlling the thunder and lightning; earth as prolific, passive and female. In the old mythologies heaven and earth formed a union and the sun, moon and stars were reputed as their children. The sun soon took the place as the manifestation of the God of Day and the moon as the God of Night and in the fantasy which symbolism and mythology built around the many diverse properties of the sun and moon their different aspects took on additional personification. The sun rising out of the ocean and again sinking into it became Neptune and the invisible sun which tarries in the night in the underworld became Pluto, and so with many other phases of its manifestations. The waxing, waning, rising and setting of the moon gave rise to groups of sisters; the graces, fates and furies and to many other forms of goddesses which are sad, chaste, alluring, winsome; or the moon assumes the form of some fair daughter of man, who being loved by some god, becomes the mother of gods and heroes.

It seems most probable that a few astrological symbols, originally very simple, gradually developed into the very complex system known as Greek Mythology. As centuries passed the true sense and original meaning of these myths and sym-



bols, transmitted from father to son, was lost, and and whole was taken to be an actual fact.

It seems probable that the earliest astrologers were shepherds, and that they discovered the most prominent phenomena of the heavenly bodies, among which was the fixed position of the pole-star and the apparent revolutions of Ursa Major around it, from which it is supposed we have one of the oldest symbols, the swastika. The "All Seeing-Eye," "The Rite of Circumambulation," the "Covering of the Lodge," and the Ladder, orientation, or the situation of Lodges due east and west, and the emblems in the rods of the Deacons, and the "point within a circle" are among symbols and symbolic ceremonies which may be illustrative of the probable origin of some of the Masonic symbolism. To place a proper estimate on the significance which these and many other symbols held in the religious thought of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Phoenecians and other races it is necessary to acquire at least an elementary knowledge of their religious systems. A survey to this would be far beyond the scope of the present outline. There is no brief account by which we may hope to obtain a comprehensive idea of thoughts of philosophic minds from those of the earliest man who tried to realize the attributes of Deity by His physical manifestations, to the 20th century student who expresses ideas about God in terms which clearly prove the limitations of finite minds to comprehend Deity. The pure religion which may have been the origin of the later phallic worship was quite probably an endeavor to express belief in Deity through the manifestations of the male principle of the sun and the female principle of the earth.

As society became organized, religious systems were founded. All religious systems have been to a great extent agents in both the development and the transmission of symbolism; yet in some ways they have been a cause of the loss of the original meanings attached to those symbols.

The Ancient Mysteries were originally pure, and taught the great basic principles of true religion, but they eventually



degenerated into gross perversions of the original purpose. In their purest state the mysteries taught by symbols and allegories (which are dramatic symbols) the great truth of the immortality of the soul and the perfectibility of man's nature by the conquest of the physical nature by the spiritual. The fragments we possess of the judgment of the soul in the Book of the Dead and the very veiled allusions to the ceremonies of initiation warrant a belief that the truths taught were of first importance to man's spiritual growth.

"By mysteries the educated reader will not understand merely doctrines or symbols, or even secrets as such, but a system of discipline and instruction in esoteric learning which was deemed too sacred and recondite for those who had not complied with the essential conditions. Every ancient country had its sacerdotal order, the members of which had been initiated into the mysteries; and even Jesus defended his practice of discoursing in parables or allegories, because that only to his disciples was it given to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God, whereas to the multitude it was not given. The priests of Egypt, the Magians of the ancient countries beyond the river Euphrates, the priests of Phoenicia and the other countries of Western Asia, were all members of sacerdotal colleges that might not divulge the esoteric knowledge to the uninitiated. Even the Brahmins of India are said to have also their mysteries at the present time; and the late Godfrey Higgins relates that a Mr. Ellis was enabled, by aid of the Masonic tokens, to enter the penetralia of a temple in the presidency of Madras. That there is some such 'freemasonry' existing in many of the countries which we denominate uncivilized and pagan, is probable. The early Christians and heretical sects had also their signs of recognition, and were distinguished like the initiates of the older worships, according to their grade, as neophytes (I Timothy III 6), spiritual, and perfect. The mysteries most familiar to classical readers are the Eleusinia, which appear to have descended from the prehistoric periods. Pococke declares them to have been of Tartar origin, which is certainly plausible, and to have combined Brahminical and Buddhistical ideas. Those admitted only to the Lesser Mysteries were denominated *Mystae*, or veiled; those initiated into the Greater Mysteries were *epoptai*, or seers. Socrates was not initiated yet after drinking the hemlock he addresses Crito: 'We owe a cock to Aesculapius.' This was the peculiar offering made by initiates on the eve of the last day, and he thus sublimely asserted that he was about to receive the great apocalypse."—(Mackenzie—*Migrations of Symbols*.)

The Ancient Mysteries were widely diffused over Asia, Africa and Europe from the earliest known period until the fifth century of our era. They were practiced with a variation of details but with a similarity of purpose and design.

The Mystery of Osiris and Isis, which is generally considered as the most ancient, was produced in Egypt as far



back as we can trace authentic history, and inferentially much further. Even with this record of its very great antiquity, some oriental scholars think it had an origin in India and was borrowed by the Egyptians.

Arthur E. Waite finds that part of the "Book of the Dead" (the name given by Prof. Karl Richard Lepsius to a collection of 166 texts or chapters of sacred writings of the earliest Egyptian literature found on the walls of tombs and scrolls of papyrus), describes ceremonies which he believes were a rite of initiation and advancement, rather than the after-death experiences of the soul in the judgment halls, an opinion held by many scholars.

Albert G. Mackey divides the Egyptian Mysteries into the three degrees of Isis, Serapis and Osiris, which was the consummation. The legend of Osiris' murder and the loss of his body; the search and recovery; its final burial; and the account given of its resurrection comprise one version of an allegory which was the principal feature of all the mysteries.

Osiris, a king of Ancient Egypt, after having taught many arts and sciences to his people, resolved to extend his benefactions still further and travel in foreign countries and educate humanity. He left his kingdom in charge of his queen, Isis, and for three years devoted himself to the task he had entered. In his absence Typhon, his brother, had conspired to usurp the throne, and at a banquet given in honor of Osiris' return, Typhon brought a beautiful chest which he announced would be given to the one whose body it most nearly fitted. Osiris laid down in the chest to try it and Typhon closed the lid and securely fastened it and threw it into the Nile.

The long search for the body by Isis was finally rewarded, and it was found in a tamarisk tree which had grown up and encased it after it had been washed ashore in Phoenicia. Isis returned to Egypt with the body, but before it could be buried Typhon again seized it and cut it into fourteen pieces, which he scattered in many places. Isis resumed her search and was



again rewarded, but one part, the phallus, was never found. The body was embalmed and buried and it was announced that Osiris had risen and resumed his place among the Gods. (Several variations of detail are given in the many versions of this legend, but the loss, recovery and resurrection are essentially the same in all.)

The Mysteries of Mithra are supposed to have been instituted by Zarathustra (Zoroaster), but Bactrian chronology is as difficult to determine as ancient Egyptian, consequently this period may have been anywhere from 1,500 to 5,000 years before the Christian era, according to the different systems of computation. The Mithric rites, although differing in dramatic details, teach the same symbolic lessons of life and immortality as those of Osiris, and are full of astronomical allusions. Mithras was worshipped as the God of Light, and the initiation into this ancient society was accompanied with extremely severe tests through seven grades or degrees. Although originating in Persia, it was afterward extended over most of Asia and Europe, and many of its monuments are preserved in European museums.

The Cabiric Mysteries were first practiced on the island of Samothrace, and are sometimes called the Samothracian Mysteries. Little is known about them, but they are generally supposed to have been instituted in honor of Atyr, one of the sun gods. The principal feasts and rites were held at the vernal equinox and it is probable that the legend of death and immortality was taught by an astronomical allegory.

The Mysteries of Adonis were practiced at Byblos, the home of the Giblytes, who were the supposed stone-squarers at the building of King Solomon's Temple; and if any historical importance may be attached to traditions relating to the building of that Temple there may be found in this connection a source of a well known Masonic legend.

The Dionysian Mysteries, instituted in honor of Dionysius, who is more usually called Bacchus, gave an allegory of immortality in a varied form. The priests were banded to-



gether into a fraternity of Dionysian Architects who were selected to erect the temples and public buildings. This fraternity existed at Tyre during the time of King Solomon.

The Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated at Eleusis, a village near Athens, were probably conducted on a larger scale than any of the others and have become the most widely known of all. They were divided into the lesser and the greater, requiring a probationary period of one year before the candidate could advance. In the Greater Mysteries an elaborate procession was made in the day time, and the initiations were conducted at night. The legend of the abduction of Persephone by Pluto, and the search and recovery for half of each year by Demeter, her mother, was exemplified in dramatic manner and is supposed to have an astronomical origin.

Cicero says, "Much that is excellent and divine does Athens seem to me to have produced and added to our life, but nothing better than those Mysteries by which we are formed and moulded from a rude and savage state of humanity; and indeed, in the Mysteries we perceive the real principles of life, and learn not only to live happily, but to die with a fairer hope."

Brother Oliver Day Street, after treating of the Mysteries, says, "Thus did ancient societies seek by means of dramatic presentation of a legend to teach the great Masonic doctrine of the resurrection and the life after the death."

The Scandinavian and Druidical Mysteries are only variations of the others and have the same objects.

The Ancient Mysteries are fascinating to those who delight in the obscure and complex portions of history; but notwithstanding what many Masonic authors have written about the subject, they should be studied with great care and discrimination. What it is possible to verify of the belief and thought, and the rites and ceremonies of those ancient societies is pieced together from fragments. These fragments are sufficient, however, to justify conceding that the Ancient



Mysteries taught moral instruction by symbolic methods. Many of the forms and ceremonies and signs and symbols seem to have been either transmitted to Freemasonry or borrowed. It is impossible to find any direct chain of transmission, and it is also impossible to find any authentic account of such symbolic teaching being incorporated into the Masonic system at any given period.

The conclusions reached by some of the greatest students are that the most important lesson of the Mysteries was the Osirian legend.

"It was the single object of all the ancient rites and mysteries practiced in the very bosom of pagan darkness, shining as a solitary beacon in all the surrounding gloom, and cheering the philosopher in his weary pilgrimage of life, to teach the immortality of the soul. This is still the great design of the third degree of Masonry." (Mackey's Manual of the Lodge.) Albert Pike says that "those who FRAMED its degrees ADOPTED the most sacred and significant symbols of a very remote antiquity used many centuries before Solomon built the Temple, to express to those who understood them and to conceal from the profane, the most recondite doctrines in regard to God, the universe and man."

Let us, however, carefully consider whether the degrees of Freemasonry were framed, and whether men of a comparatively recent date ADOPTED some of its most significant symbols. The brethren of the period of the formation of the Grand Lodge of England did not have access to the records of Ancient Egypt. Champollion announced his discovery of the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone as the Key to reading Egyptian hieroglyphics in 1822, and any knowledge Freemasons had of the Ancient mysteries must have been through some transmission.

The Mysteries of Osiris and Isis are known to have been celebrated on the island of Philae as late as 453 A. D., and the most prominent of the Mysteries that influenced European thought in the Christian era was the Mysteries of Mithra.



It will be impossible to limit a study of symbolism to strictly historical or archaeological lines, although we must use them both as far as they can give us facts before entering upon speculation. The records we possess clearly show that the first serious contemplations which man indulged in regarding things not pertaining to his immediate physical necessities, were Light and Life. The East as a place from which the orb of light appeared to come was one of the first things that started the human mind on its endless journey of inquiry into the reasons thereof, and eventually developed the present knowledge of the universe and its laws.