

Meaning of Masonry

THE MEANING OF MASONRY

By Walter L. Wilmshurst

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

The Meaning of Masonry, by Walter Leslie Wilmshurst (1867-1939) is one of the best books I have ever read explaining the philosophical teachings of Freemasonry. Wilmshurst accurately described Freemasonry as a fraternity that teaches its members the great principles of "brotherly love," "relief," and "truth." However, Wilmshurst was concerned that throughout the Craft's history "brotherly love," and "relief" had been overly stressed, and he saw this as a "fatal flaw" which resulted in the Craft's ignoring its most important "mission"—the search for "truth." Thus, Wilmshurst believed that this "fatal flaw," if allowed to grow within the Craft unchallenged, would become the major contributing factor in turning it into just another one of the many social charities that exists today. Wilmshurst's most important lesson that he emphasized several times throughout this book was that the Craft's real *raison d'être* was improving a Freemason's life; and ultimately his soul, through his life affirming journey in the pursuit of "truth." Wilmshurst's thesis, which I whole heartedly agree with, is that what sets Freemasonry apart from all social charities is its requirement for its members to search for "truth." When one reads this book it is important to understand that Wilmshurst used the words "truth" and "regeneration" as his way of describing a "spiritual rebirth" within each individual Mason. He also underscored that neither charitable work nor expert ritual practice could bring about a "spiritual rebirth" to the Freemason. Finally, Wilmshurst was extremely fearful that since "truth" was so hard for its members to recognize, learn, and thus achieve; it has too often been neglected by the Craft.[\[1\]](#)

The five chapters of Wilmshurst's book are drawn from five separate papers that he wrote throughout his life. These chapters are packed with explanations of Masonic symbolism and philosophical teachings that can be a bit overbearing for the less informed initiate. However, I found many of his ideas about Masonic "truth" helped to "illuminate the path" for my own spiritual journey. It is some of Wilmshurst's key ideas explaining Masonic rituals and symbols dispersed through his five chapters that this book review will hone in on.

In chapter I. *The Deeper Symbolism of Freemasonry*, Wilmshurst defined what he believed to be the real meaning of the Masonic system. "To state things briefly, Masonry offers us, in dramatic form and by means of dramatic ceremonial a philosophy of spiritual life of man and a diagram of the process of regeneration."[\[2\]](#) Wilmshurst further correctly stated that Masonic philosophy was consistent with all religious doctrines; thus, it supported the notion born out of the "Age of Enlightenment" of the universal "brotherhood of man." In addition, his statement placed particular importance on the notion of "regeneration;" which he explained as a rebirth of the Mason as described through the Craft's "Hiramic" legend. As a historian, I wholeheartedly agree with Wilmshurst's acknowledgement that Masonic philosophy and its "Hiramic" legend borrowed heavily from secret "Mysteries" dating as far back as to the Egyptian civilization. In addition, Wilmshurst recognized that there were other "Mysteries" running through later epochs of history from both Eastern and Western civilization. His list of luminary figures who taught the knowledge of these

"Mysteries" included: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Moses, and St. John just to mention a few. Wilmhurst also correctly recognized that there was no direct historical continuity between the Egyptian "Mysteries" running through the long line of historical epochs up to the start of speculative Masonry in the 18th century. However, he did correctly recognize that the "Hiramic" legend had elements that harkened back to the very first "regeneration myth" from Egypt; which told of the "resurrection" of their god Osiris, and ran through other legends of "rebirth" up to that of Jesus.[3]

Wilmhurst book introduced me to what I found to be the most erudite explanation of the philosophical teaching behind the placing of Masonic initiates at the N.E. corner of the lodge. He explained that a new initiate to Freemasonry was placed in the N.E. corner of the lodge to teach him that at that very moment there were two paths in life before him to travel. One path was to the East, towards the "light" which represented goodness. This was the path that the initiate was encouraged to take which would eventually lead him towards his eventual "regeneration." The other path was to the North, towards "darkness," spiritual deprivation, ignorance, and evil. Thus, Wilmhurst asserted that the Masonic degrees metaphorically represented the "metamorphosis of man." Thus, man as I believe was so aptly described by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, (1588-1679), starts out in life in a "state of nature" *ergo* without wisdom. A Mason's metamorphosis into a "regenerated" man takes place when he travels "East" taking the path of "light;" thus, subduing his natural inclinations through spiritual purification which brings him towards "truth" and "rebirth." [4] I found this very wise explanation most helpful in my understanding of the importance of taking the right path towards "Masonic Light" to obtain "truth."

In chapter II. *Masonry as a Philosophy*, Wilmhurst introduced another key term in his book to help explain the "Hiramic" legend, "the Fall of Man." "'Paradise Lost' is the real theme of Masonry no less than of Milton, as it is also of all ancient systems of Mysteries." [5] Thus, Wilmhurst insightfully explained that the real tragedy of the "Hiramic" legend was about the conspiracy that the Temple craftsmen entered into to "extort" the "knowledge" that they were not 'spiritually' prepared to possess. This conspiracy unfortunately culminated in the murder of the Grand Architect. Thus, in the process of trying to "extort" this "knowledge" from the Grand Architect they brought about a moral disaster—the "Fall of Man." Thus, Wilmhurst demonstrated in his writings that the "Hiramic" legend could be seen as a two part story. The first half of the "Hiramic" legend served as a metaphor for the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The second half of the "Hiramic" legend explained how the Temple craftsmen were ordered by King Solomon to embark on a quest, to "find what had been lost," with the murder of their Grand Architect. This quest teaches every Freemason that King Solomon's Temple served as the metaphorical Garden of Eden. Thus, Wilmhurst asserts that in actuality what the Freemason needs to complete the construction of is not a physical building; but his own temple, "not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens." Therefore, the Freemason must prepare himself for "regeneration." [6]

In chapter III. *Further Notes on Craft Symbolism*, Wilmhurst reiterated a key notion that I have always believed was never stressed enough to our new brethren; that man was his own "Temple." "It must be remembered that everything in Masonry is figurative of *man* and his human constitution and spiritual evolution." [7] In essence, what Wilmhurst wrote was that it was the Freemason's immortal soul, "his Temple," that was in "rubble and ruin." Therefore, the Freemason's "Temple" needed to be rebuilt using Masonic moral teachings to "clear away the rubble;" which stood for their impure natural inclinations. Thus, only when the "rubble" was cleared out of his life in this world;

could the Mason then perfect “his spiritual Temple” for the next world.[8]

In chapter IV. *Further Notes on Craft Symbolism*, I found Wilmhurst’s definition of the Royal Arch Degree and the degree’s importance to the body of Freemasonry to be “another important brick placed in my path” to spiritual “truth.” “The Royal Arch Degree seeks to express that new and intensified life to which the candidate can be raised and the exalted degree of consciousness that comes with it.”[9] Thus, Wilmhurst asserted that only in this degree could a Mason while still a creature of the flesh perfect his soul and be able to obtain “Divine consciousness.” For Wilmhurst, obtaining “Divine consciousness” incorporated the Mason realizing that the “Temple” of his old-self “lay waste and was in ruins,” because of his natural impure instincts. Thus, Wilmhurst pointed out that the Freemason had to “metaphorically” emulate the Jews in Babylonian captivity. The Freemason, would in similar fashion like the Jews, would have to once again embark on a journey to his own “spiritual home” to erect a new “Temple” on the site of the old one.[10] Much to my delight; as a student of Eastern religion and philosophy I found Wilmhurst’s explanation of the Royal Arch Degree touching on many themes taught in Hinduism, and Buddhism. Wilmhurst’s explanation of perfecting the soul in his book reminds me of the Hindu belief in that only the perfected soul reaches *Moksha* (heaven); for Buddhist’s the perfected soul attains *Nirvana*.

In chapter V. *Freemasonry In Relation To the Ancient Mysteries*, Wilmhurst illuminated further his notions on the Craft’s connections to the ancient “Mysteries” which had been handed down from time immemorial. He went into greater detail in this chapter on how one could not miss the similarities that many civilizations and various religions shared. He perceptively picked up on the fact that the Craft, following in the footsteps of the ancient “Mysteries,” used myth to impart wisdom to its initiates.[11] On this point Wilmhurst would get no argument from the Twentieth Century’s two greatest minds on the subject; Joseph Campbell, (1904-87), and Karl Jaspers, (1883-1969). There is no doubt in my mind that speculative Freemasonry is the “longest living child of the Enlightenment.” Thus, “As children of the Enlightenment,” Freemasonry’s founders borrowed heavily from the new knowledge of antiquity obtained during the Enlightenment; such as, knowledge about the “Mysteries” of earlier civilizations and religious teachings outside of Christianity.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Meaning of Masonry*, by Walter Leslie Wilmshurst. However, I would not recommend the book to be read by a newly raised Mason. One needs to be well versed in the basic philosophical concepts of Freemasonry before tackling this book. I do emphatically recommend the reading of this book by all Freemason’s who want to have a deeper understanding of the Masonic philosophy behind the search for “truth” and the need for preparing their souls for “rebirth.” After all, that inevitable day comes for all of us when we are called to “lay down our working tools to travel to that celestial abode above; that house not made with hands eternal in the Heavens.”

1. Walter Leslie Wilmhurst, *The Meaning of Freemasonry*, (London: Rider Press, 1927: repr., New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1980), 3-18.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 21-45.
4. Ibid., 33-52.
5. Ibid., 61.
6. Ibid., 61-73.

7. Ibid., 91.
8. Ibid., 89-91.
9. Ibid., 140.
10. Ibid., 154-158.
11. Ibid., 170-192.