

Freemason's Key

THE FREEMASON'S KEY: A STUDY OF MASONIC SYMBOLISM

By Michael R. Poll

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

The Freemason's Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism, edited by Michael R. Poll, (1954-present), is a very worthwhile book for any newly raised Freemason. Poll's book, is actually a collection of several articles from intelligent authors explaining many of Freemasonry's symbols. Since this book was compilation of several author's ideas; I found that the true worth of this book for my "Masonic journey" was in its "multi-faceted" view of Masonic symbolism and philosophy. Every Freemason learns that symbolism is the "cornerstone" on which Masonry's philosophy is built upon; therefore, books like Poll's serve as a great "foundation stone" on which to build one's "Temple" of knowledge upon.

In the article, *What is Symbolism?* by R. L. Meekren, I found a common thesis for the entire book. "Nothing is actually isolated in the world."^[1] As a retired adjunct professor of history and philosophy, I find that Meekren's thesis is right on target with my understanding of how human cognition works. Since humankind's inception, we have been comparing, contrasting, and categorizing things from the "metaphysical" world around us to gain a better understanding of "particulars." Thus, what Meekren essentially purports in his thesis is that in order to truly understand symbolism one must use a "comparative" approach to the subject. Thus, Meekren argued that to understand the "metaphysical" Masonic world one must have the following realization. "Masonry cannot be understood fully as an isolated fact. Its history cannot be properly understood in ignorance of the secular history of the countries and communities in which it has appeared."^[2]

In the article, *The System of Symbolic Introduction*, written by the very renowned Masonic author Albert Mackey, (1807-81), he stated that our English brethren had the best definition of Freemasonry. "Freemasonry is a science of morality, developed and inculcated by the ancient method of symbolism."^[3] Mackey correctly asserted, in my opinion, that if you stripped away symbolism from Freemasonry then what is left is a lifeless and soulless institution. In fact, Freemasonry relies on symbolism more than any other civic organization, and as much as any religion that I have ever studied. Mackey astutely recognized the importance of symbolism to the development of ancient humankind from his reading of the eminent classical historian George Grote, (1794-1871). Grote's following quote is well known among all historians. "At a time when language was in its infancy, visible symbols were the most vivid means of acting upon the minds of ignorant hearers."^[4] I think that Grote's quote about symbolism serves as a perfect example of how the adherents of Hinduism, the vast majority of who were illiterate, have learned the teachings of their religion over the past five millennia. In addition, Grote's quote also explains how our ancient "operative" Brethren, the medieval stonemasons many of whom were illiterate as well, learned their craft. I found that Mackey made a very interesting observation about the development of symbolism and the use of language *vis-à-vis* religious development throughout mankind's history. For example, Mackey found that the Egyptian religion was "heavily laden" with symbolism; however, with the

advent of written language, Judaism was less reliant on symbolism, and Christianity even less so than Judaism.[5]

In the article, *Symbolism in Mythology*, written by C. T. Sego, I found myself "transported" back to my graduate school days sitting in rapt attention to one of my favorite philosophy professors, Lawrence Hatab. Hatab's lectures on "Myth and Philosophy" were so erudite on the subject of mythology and its effect on philosophy and history. The semester I spent learning with professor Hatab was a life altering experience for me; it forever changed the way I understand what "truth" is. Thus, I found that the articles in this book so neatly "dove-tailed" with what professor Hatab wrote in his book concerning the importance of mythology to human understanding. "There is a deep meaning in mythological language which expresses what cannot be expressed in rational or scientific language. Such matters include, among other things, existential meaning, the lived world, and primal origins." [6] I always found Hatab's quote on the worth of mythology to human understanding a very beautiful and astute description of Freemasonry's "Hiramic" legend. Thus, Sego in a similar fashion recognized the importance of symbolism and myth to how humans understood the "metaphysical" world. "There is a psychological need for symbols, a real demand for stories, which man has ever supplied." [7] Sego made a fascinating and important observation about the use of myth throughout social history. Sego argued that based on what the goal of a myth was depended on whether it evolved over time or not. For example, when myths were employed for entertainment purposes, they tended to be changed by the bards who told them with each new generation. An example of this is our knowledge of the development of Homer's *Iliad* and *the Odyssey*. Literary experts for over the last 100 years have convincingly been able to prove that Homer did not invent those myths credited to him; however, he was the first bard to write them down, and he no doubt made substantial changes as he transcribed them. In addition, Sego convincingly pointed out that when myths were not employed for entertainment purposes, then their form and lessons did not change or evolve over time. Thus, Sego stated: "So the legend of the third degree, introduced into our body I do not know when, is the same today as it was when we first learned it." [8]

Symbolism of the Three Degrees, originally written in 1922 by Oliver Day Street, (1886-1944), was a distinguished Freemason who served two terms as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Alabama from 1925-27. His article is the longest in Poll's book and it contains a plethora of information concerning the three degrees of Freemasonry. However, I was able to "dig out" some real "nuggets" of useful information on symbolism and myth. In Street's section explaining symbolism and myth of the Master Mason's degree, he asked the following question. "Do we find any institutions in ancient time similar to our own and employing our symbols for like purposes? I answer at once that we do." [9] Street's answer pointed him towards the history of the "Ancient Mysteries;" starting with Egyptian mythology, as a source for the allegory of the "Hiramic" legend in the Master Mason degree. On this notion of the "Ancient Mysteries" Street walked a familiar path with such eminent Masonic scholars as: Albert Mackey, (1807-81), Albert Pike, (1809-91), Robert Freke Gould (1836-1915), William Leslie Wilmhurst, (1867-1939), and Joseph Fort Newton, (1876-1950). Street, along with the Freemasons just listed, agreed that Freemasonry's "Hiramic" legend was based on many "Ancient Mysteries" that followed a historical lineage all the way back to ancient Egypt. "In Egypt they were known as the Mysteries of Osiris and Isis, and these appear to have been the model for all others." [10] Having recently written a book review on Wilmhurst's excellent book *The Meaning of Masonry*, I found that Street and Wilmhurst could be looked upon as "Siamese twins" on the subject

of the “Ancient Mysteries. I remember that Wilmhurst also stated that Masonic philosophy and its “Hiramic” legend borrowed heavily from secret “Mysteries” dating as far back as to the Egyptian civilization.^[11] Thus, Street elucidates that the myth of Osiris and Isis gave “root” to later “Ancient Mysteries” around the world. Examples include: the “Dionysian Mystery” in Greece, the “Adonis Mystery” of Phoenicia, the “Mithras Mystery” of Persia, and the “Brahma Mystery” of India. Street also pointed out that all these “Ancient Mysteries” had the similarity of having a Deity or “heroic figure” at the center of their mythology. In addition, they emphasized in their teachings death, resurrection, and the immortality of the soul to all their followers. Not surprisingly, one could also see that the story of Jesus and the “Hiramic” legend followed the same formula from the “Ancient Mysteries.” Thus, Street correctly surmised that when he studied the form and tenets of many of these “Ancient Mysteries” they had other similarities as well. These similarities included the following practices. Members went through an initiation to welcome them into the “mystery.” Members had to show a proficiency in the “mystery’s” tenets so that they could proceed along their journey through the “mystery.” Members were taught certain “signs” or modes of recognition that could be used to identify each other. Finally, members took secret oaths.^[12] Obviously, Street’s description of the dogmas of these “Ancient Mysteries” would sound all too familiar to Freemasons.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Freemason’s Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism*, by Michael R. Poll. I would recommend his book to all Freemasons who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding about Masonic symbolism and the effect that the “Ancient Mysteries” have had on the development of the “Hiramic legend.” One does not need to be well versed in the basic philosophical concepts of Freemasonry before reading this book. Finally, I am pleased to say that Poll’s compendium of articles has been very useful in my gaining a deeper appreciation for two of my great “loves” Egyptian history and Freemasonry.

1. R. L. Meekren, “What is Symbolism?” in *The Freemason’s Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism*, ed. Michael R. Poll (New Orleans: Cornerstone Publishing Co., 2008), 1.
2. Ibid. 3.
3. Albert Mackey, “The System of Symbolic Introduction” in *The Freemason’s Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism*, ed. Michael R. Poll (New Orleans: Cornerstone Publishing Co., 2008), 11.
4. Ibid. 12.
5. Ibid. 12-13.
6. Lawrence Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy: A contest of Truths*, (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1990), 12.

7. C. T. Sego, "Symbolism in Mythology" in *The Freemason's Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism*, ed. Michael R. Poll (New Orleans: Cornerstone Publishing Co., 2008), 23.
8. Ibid. 24.
9. Oliver Day Street, "Symbolism of the Three Degrees" in *The Freemason's Key: A Study of Masonic Symbolism*, ed. Michael R. Poll (New Orleans: Cornerstone Publishing Co., 2008), 113.
10. Ibid. 113.
11. Walter Leslie Wilmhurst, *The Meaning of Freemasonry*, (London: Rider Press, 1927: repr., New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1980), 21-45.
12. Street, 113-117.