Masons of California

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASONIC RITUAL

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The history of the Masonic Ritual has usually been treated from two directions – neither of which is very satisfactory. On the one hand, it has been the subject of myth and fantasy. It has been claimed that the Masonic ritual is derived from ancient sources – the Knights Templar of the Middle Ages; the Comacine Masters of late antiquity; the collegia of ancient Rome; the mystery religions of ancient Greece; the Essenes of ancient Israel; and even ancient Egypt, whose ceremonies were brought out of Egypt by Moses, and descended to us through the ancient Israelites. That none of this is supported by a shred of evidence should not be surprising. But much of the popular literature about Freemasonry, such as *Born in Blood*, or *The Hiram Key*, is sold on the basis that the author has finally "discovered" the true source of the Masonic Ritual. If you are attracted to such explanations, you may find this paper a bit disappointing. I am not going to tell you the "true origin" of the Masonic Ritual. We do not know its true origin – or at least we don't know the entire story about its origin. But we do know a lot about it, and I will be sharing some of it with you in this paper.

The other direction that the history of the Masonic Ritual has taken is the factual approach. While this sounds like the right approach – letting the facts speak for themselves – it is deceptive. An example of such an approach is that of Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones in a paper published in 1944 by the Manchester Association for Masonic Research, and as cited in David Stevenson's *The Origins of Freemasonry*, as follows:

> "The duty of the historian, masonic or otherwise, *is to hunt for facts and verify conclusions, and not to fill in the gaps by the dangerous argument of analogy ... or by an equally dangerous exercise of the imagination ... There are undoubtedly numerous gaps in the history of freemasonry, but to fill them, not by the successful search for new facts, but by the use of the imagination, is to revert to the mythical or imaginative treatment of the subject.*" (David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, Cambridge University Press, ©1988, page 2).

Stevenson comments on this passage from Knoop and Jones thus:

> This stark creed has been valuable in raising the standards of masonic history, but in trying to cure the excesses of one extreme it goes too far in the opposite direction by suggesting that the historian must limit activity to the collection of facts. These facts, it seems, may then be left virtually to speak for themselves, and where facts are lacking all the historian can do is seek new facts. If they cannot be found no attempt should be made to fill the gap. ..... Imagination is in fact an essential item in the historian's toolkit, both in trying to make sense of facts and in speculating when facts are lacking, though it must of course be intelligent and informed imagination, and it must be made clear where fact ends and interpretation and speculation begin (Stevenson, *op. cit.* page 3).

If neither of these two approaches is satisfactory – the "fantasy" school and the "factual" school, what approach should we take? I would suggest that a third approach – an approach that treats the facts with respect, but which also develops hypotheses based on these facts which can be tested by future scholars and historians. That is the approach in this paper. In it I will share some facts about the history of our Masonic ritual as we have discovered them, and then I will leave you with an interpretation of these facts. I hope that this interpretation is imaginative in the best sense and not fantasy in the worst sense.

History is a part of the discipline of social science, and shares with it the inability to "test" hypotheses in the manner common in most of the natural sciences. But its hypotheses are testable, nonetheless, because they can be challenged by new facts which are subsequently brought to light, and by new observations and conclusions from the entire body of facts. The history of the Masonic Ritual is thus subject to these same laws of rigorous examination. In this paper I present an explanatory hypothesis on the origin of our ritual, but it is certainly subject to challenge, confirmation and/or disconfirmation. The facts are "true" insofar as we have all the facts and truly understand them; the hypothesis is not true, nor is it false, but is a means of testing the facts to see if they fit the hypothesis. I therefore invite every reader to do just that. Your own research can begin where I leave off, and you may have the opportunity to advance the state of our knowledge as a result of attempting to disprove what I have to say.

First, a look at the facts as we have them, about the Masonic ritual. A readily available source for our earliest rituals is a book originally published in 1943 called

The Early Masonic Catechisms, by Douglas Knoop, G.P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer. The copy I have, and which I will cite, is the 1963 edition, edited by the late Harry Carr, and published by Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, in London, England. This is the second edition, and it contains two additional texts which had been discovered since the original publication in 1943. While it would be useful to use the originals of the rituals reprinted in *The Early Masonic Catechisms*, the reprints are accurate and satisfactory for the purposes of the average researcher.

The earliest "snippets" of Masonic Ritual which we possess – and "snippets" they are – are from Scotland. Anyone who has read the works of David Stevenson will understand why this is so. He presents a very strong argument for the origin of Speculative Freemasonry in the operative masonic lodges of Scotland. There is a possibility that Speculative Freemasonry could have arisen from operative lodges in England – but we have no evidence for it. So based on the evidence available to us, the earliest Masonic Ritual of which we have any knowledge comes from the operative stonemasons' lodges in Scotland.

An example of such a "snippet" is the celebrated "Haughfoot Fragment." It is truly a "fragment" – the last paragraph of what was once a more complete ritual. It seems that the ritual was written out in a book which had many more blank pages. The secretary of the Lodge of Haughfoot in Scotland decided to use the book for the minutes of the lodge. He tore out the pages containing the ritual, presumably to preserve its secrecy, but the last page of the ritual was on the right hand page, with the back side blank. As a thrifty Scot, he didn't want to waste paper, so he started his minutes on the back of that page in the book – preserving the last section of the ritual for posterity. Here is what is says, remembering that it is a fragment:

> "..... Of entrie as the apprentice did Leaving out (The Common Judge). Then they whisper the word as before – and the Master Mason grips his hand after the ordinary way."

From this fragment we learn that something was being done with an apprentice mason, and that whatever was being done, was done "leaving out the Common Judge." We aren't quite sure what the "Common Judge" was, but some scholars think that it was the "Twenty-Four Inch Gauge." You might think of our use of the term "The Twenty-Four Inch Gauge and the Common Gavel" to better understand what was being said. It is entirely possible that the ritual had earlier explained these

two instruments of masonry to the Entered Apprentice Mason, and now, at this point in the ceremony, the explanation was to be omitted. There is also a reference to whispering the word "as before," perhaps showing that the Entered Apprentice had been invested with a word earlier in the ceremony, and is now hearing it again so that he remembers it. The excerpt then concludes with a grip – "after the ordinary way."

It is easier to understand what was going on here when this excerpt is compared with an excerpt from the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696. [This documents is set forth in full in this section of the course.] While the Haughfoot Fragment is dated 1702, it is probably much older. Listen to the words of the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript on this same subject:

> "...He makes the masters sign, and says the same words of entrie as the apprentice did only leaving out the common judge then the masons whisper the word among themselves beginning at the youngest as formerly ..... Then the master gives him the word and gripes his hand after the masons way....."

The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript was only discovered in 1930, and is illustrative of the way that our body of facts is continually growing. Some of the prominent researchers in the history of the Masonic Ritual at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century did not have access to this document. Their conclusions about the origin of certain ceremonies in the ritual, and the explanation thereof, were thus based on incomplete knowledge of all the facts that we now possess. And the same thing is true for future researchers. There may be more materials yet to be discovered which will elucidate our search for the history of our Masonic Ritual, and thus our present conclusions may need to be modified in light of these new discoveries.

Beginning with the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696, other similar manuscripts now begin to appear. They are all written in the "catechism" format, and an explanation of that format is now in order. A "catechism" is a series of questions and answers used to teach a subject. It comes from the Greek word for "oral instruction" and originally described the method of instruction of "catechumens" in the early Christian Church. As Christianity spread around the Mediterranean basin, it became a custom to receive new members into the church

only after a period of instruction. This method of instruction, patterned on that in use in the philosophical schools, consisted of a series of questions and answers which were memorized. The instructor would teach the catechumen the answers to "set" questions, and then ask him or her those questions as a part of the examination preparatory to baptism.

The use of this form of instruction long survived the early church, and is still found today in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican churches. Used as a way of demonstrating approved knowledge of Christianity, it was also a way of summarizing the essential teachings of the church – ensuring adherence to orthodoxy. Freemasonry inherited this form of teaching – how we are not yet sure – but the "question and answer" method of teaching is our oldest source of information on the early Masonic Ritual. Here is an example [from the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript]:

Q:4 Where was you entered? An: At the honourable lodge.
Q:5 What makes a true and perfect lodge? An: seven master, five entered apprentices, A days Journey from a burroughs town, without bark of dog or crow of cock.
Q:6 Does no les make a true and perfect lodge, An: yes five masons and three entered apprentices etc.
Q:7 Does no less? An: The more the merrier the fewer the better chear.
Q:11 Are there any lights in your lodge An: yes three the nor east. S w, and eastern passage The one denotes the master mason, the other the warden, the third the setter croft.
Q:12 Are there any jewells in your lodge An Yes three, Perpend Esler a Square pavement and broad oval.

You can see from this excerpt that the content of the ritual is being taught by means of questions and answers. This format is still familiar to us because that is the format of the candidate's lecture for each of the three degrees in our California Ritual. These lectures were originally delivered in lodge by the officers and only at a later time relegated to private instruction for the candidate who was required to memorize them and deliver them in lodge in order to advance.

The content of this excerpt is also familiar to us in certain respects, although our ritual today has different answers to the questions. Note the interest in a definition of a "true and perfect lodge," with the answer being "five masons and three entered apprentices." It must be remembered that at this early stage the three

degrees of Masonry were not yet developed. In the early catechisms we find symbolism from what became the three degrees at a later date. However, there is evidence that the three levels that would become our three degrees were already evolving. Here is Question 15 from the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript:

> Q:15 After the masons have examined you by all or some of these Questions and that you have answered them exactly and mad the signes, they will acknowledge you, but no a master mason or fellow croft but only as as [? = an] apprentice, soe they will say I see you have been in the Kitchine but I know not if you have been in the hall, Ans I have been in the hall as weel as in the kitchine.
>
> Quest 1 Are you a fellow craft Ans yes.
> Quest 2 How many points of the fellowship are ther Ans five viz foot to foot Knee to Kn[ee] Heart to Heart, Hand to Hand and ear to ear. Then make the sign of fellowship and shake hand and you will be acknowledged a true Mason.

You will recognize from this excerpt material that appears in the second and third degrees, although it is not at all clear at this point in the manuscript that this material was given to an Entered Apprentice Mason. In fact it is at this point in the manuscript that we first get an idea of why it was written. At first it might seem that this manuscript is an "aide memoire" – an "aide to the memory" for those who were either learning the catechism for use in the lodge, or were using it with candidates. But with Question 15 we learn that this manuscript is probably an *exposé*, designed to allow a non-mason to work his way into a lodge, or at the very least, to prove to another mason that he is one of them.

From 1696 to 1730 *Early Masonic Catechisms* records no fewer than sixteen manuscripts and printed versions of what I may term "proto-rituals." They are not complete rituals (that is, not a complete ceremony), because they are intended to represent the question-and-answer format used in the lodge itself by the officers, or in private instruction with the candidate. If you were to visit a lodge during this time period, this is what you would be likely to find:

- The lodge would be meeting in a private room in a tavern or inn – probably on the second floor, if available, for privacy.
- In the center of the room would be a large table – not a permanent piece of furniture, but rather made of planks laid on trestles. These "trestle boards" would be used at a later date to draw designs upon for the instruction of

candidates, but not in the earliest years. In the earliest times the tiler would draw designs on the floor of the lodge for the instruction of the candidates in chalk ("the slightest touch of which will leave a trace behind"), with designs picked out in charcoal, and often in powdered clay as well. At the end of the evening the newest Entered Apprentice was required to wash out the designs with a bucket of water and a mop so that no one not a mason could "..... behold the form thereof."

- The officers and members would meet around the table. Sometimes the table would be in the shape of a "U", but more often not. The master sat on the east side of the table in the center, and the two wardens sat on the opposite side – the west – near the corner of the table. The Senior Warden was in the northwest corner and the Junior Warden in the southwest corner.
- The meeting was formally called to order by a rehearsal of some of the questions and answers that were also used to instruct a candidate. These are not "lectures" so much as an echo of the lectures used to set the tone for the meeting and to remind the members present of the time when they were first made a mason. An excerpt from the Trinity College manuscript of 1711 will illustrate how this was done (with the spelling modernized for clarity):

  Q: What manner of man are you? Answer: I am a mason.

  Q: How shall I know that? Answer: By the signs, tokens, & points of my entry.

  Q: What makes a full, & perfect lodge? Answer: Three masters, three fellow craftsmen, and three Entered Apprentices.

  Q: How stands your lodge? Answer: East & west, like the Temple of Jerusalem

  Q: Where sits the master? Answer: In a chair of bone in the middle of a four square pavement. [NB – this is probably an allusion to the "instructive tongue" as well as to the master of the lodge.]

  Q: What sits he there for? Answer: To observe the sun's rising to set his men to work.

  Q: How high is your lodge? Answer: as high as the stars – inches and feet innumerable.

  Q: Where do you keep the key of the lodge? Answer: In a box of bone within a foot & 1⁄2 of the door of the lodge.

  Q: How far is it from the cable to the anchor? Answer: As far as from the tongue to the heart.

Q: Which way blows the wind? Answer: East & west & out of the south.

It does not take much imagination to understand how these questions and answers evolved over the centuries into something more familiar to us. There is a question as to how many make up a lodge – the question of a quorum – because the concept of a quorum is essential to the validity of any meeting. The question about the height of the lodge finds it familiar echo in our monitorial work today, where we learn that "The form of a lodge is oblong. It extends from East to West, and from North to South, and it is said to be thus extensive to denote the universality of Masonry and to teach us that a Mason's charity should be equally extensive, for in every country and in every clime are Masons to be found." This excerpt from our monitorial lecture of the First Degree of Masonry shows how the question and answer format was probably used. In the opening of the lodge it would occur as a question and answer between the Master and the Senior Warden. Later in the evening there would be an explanation based on this earlier question and answer, along the lines of our current ritual. Then, when the lecture was rehearsed at the end of the evening – again in question and answer format – the format used at the opening of the lodge would be repeated.

Let us continue with a typical meeting of a lodge at the beginning of the 18th century:

- The candidate would be introduced into the lodge by his sponsor. His sponsor was a "friend and brother on whose fidelity" the candidate could "with the utmost confidence rely." There were no deacons at this stage of development, and the candidate was conducted through the ceremonies by his sponsor.
- The suitability of the candidate to become a mason was ceremonially ascertained as he was conducted around the table. Obviously he had passed some sort of ballot in the first place, or he would not be present. But the lodge now wanted to confirm some things about him as a lodge. Each of the wardens, and the master, asked him certain questions about his suitability to be made a mason – some of which questions were answered for him by his sponsor because, of course, he could not be expected to know the proper "masonic" responses to the questions.
- An obligation was then administered. The oldest of our manuscript rituals almost always include the obligation. The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript has it thus:

They give him the oath as follows (with the spelling modernized for clarity): By God Himself, and 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 whether by word, nor write, nor put it in writing 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 [Apprentice] Mason, so help you God."

Reference to the other rituals over the next twenty years or so will show the curious student how this simple obligation was elaborated – with characteristics that will be quite familiar to the knowledgeable mason of today.

Note that I have described the conferral of the Entered Apprentice Degree. At this time there was only one ceremony of admission, although the *exposés* clearly show that they were aware of the advanced ranks of fellow and master, even though these are not clearly represented in the ritual itself. The 1925 Prestonian Lecture, delivered by Bro. Lionel Vibert, was entitled "The Development of the Trigradal System." Vibert states that "In, or just before 1725 the Acceptance was divided up to form the E.A. and F.C. degrees, and by 1730 the trigradal system was definitely established."

The date of 1730 is an important one, because it was in that year that Samuel Prichard published *Masonry Dissected*. For the first time the three degrees of Masonry as we know them appear in print. The material is still in "catechal" format – a series of questions and answers – and there is no doubt that the previous pattern of the use of this kind of ritual continued in the 1730's, and beyond. Listen to the opening dialogue. You may find something familiar:

Q: From whence came you? A: From the Holy Lodge of St. John's.
Q: What recommendations brought you from thence? A: The Recommendations which I brought from the Right Worshipful Brothers and Fellows of the Right Worshipful and Holy Lodge of St. John's, from whence I came, and Greet you thrice heartily well.
Q: What came you here to do? A:

Not to do my own proper Will,
But to subdue my Passion still;
The Rules of Masonry in hand to take,
And daily Progress therein make.

The answer is in primitive rhyme, and we know from other extant rituals of this period that rhyme was sometimes used. The ritual of the Royal Order of Scotland is in rhyme (dated 1736), and the ritual of the Ark Mariner Degree is also in rhyme.

Vibert goes on to note: "In the Second Degree there appears originally to have been no distinct obligation and when it does come in it includes some provisions that now form part of that in the Third." That is not surprising, because a key element in the Third Degree was included in the passage of an Entered Apprentice to that of a Fellow Craft in the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript, as noted above. A masonic lodge consisted of "brothers and fellows" at this period – that is to say, Entered Apprentice Masons and Fellow Craft Masons. The operative craft had had master masons, but the term had more the meaning of those who were full members of the guild than that of a separate degree. By the early 18th Century Speculative Masonry was evolving in different ways from the older system, but kept the earlier terminology to describe what was actually a new system.

To summarize what we have said so far, masonic lodges in the years before the formation of the first grand lodge in 1717 met regularly to enjoy masonic fellowship, to rehearse the teachings and ceremonies of masonry through question and answer style lectures, and to "make mason" – "accepted masons" was the actual term – through a single ceremony of induction. There is a strong possibility that as the material used in these ceremonies grew more elaborate it was necessary to break the ceremony apart and confer it on two different occasions. From such a simple but practical necessity what we know of as the Fellow Craft degree arose. An example of the additional ceremony for the Fellow Craft, as described by Vibert, is as follows: ".....there was an addition to the ceremony in that the newly made F.C. re-entered the Lodge to receive his wages, which he did from the Senior Warden between the Pillars after having passed a test." That particular ritual never made it into our version of the Fellow Craft Degree – but it survives today as a part of the Mark Master Degree. All our new Fellow Craft is told is that fellow crafts received their wages in the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple. This is an example of how ritual develops alternative ceremonies which may never completely disappear from Freemasonry, but instead migrate to other rites and degrees.

As mentioned before, Prichard is the first one to clearly show that Freemasonry consisted of three degrees by 1730. We know that the substance of our Third Degree – the Hiramic Legend – existed earlier, but we are unsure as to its use. There

is a clue, however, in the later development of the ritual under the Ancients. Some lodges that had not accepted the governance of the premier grand lodge formed their own grand lodge in 1751. These lodges had the three degrees of masonry, but they used the Third Degree as a qualifying degree for those who wished to become master of the lodge. There is evidence that the lodges which later formed the Ancients' Grand Lodge conferred the first two degrees on a regular basis, but felt that the Master Mason Degree was so important that it should only be conferred on those who were interested in being the leader of the lodge. The term for our Second Section of the Third Degree was "The Master's Part," and it was conferred in a lodge of master masons – a separate organization which frequently met on Sunday afternoons. Today masonic lodges in this country are Master's Lodges which confer the first and second degrees as preparation for the Master Mason Degree. In the middle part of the 18th Century it was just the opposite. Lodges were "masonic lodges" that conferred the first and second degrees of Masonry to admit candidates as masons, and then – at a later time – conferred the Third Degree through a separate organization – "masters' lodges."

The Ancients actually practiced the "trigradal" system of their own, which was not the same trigradal system described by Lionel Vibert. This "three –degree" system consisted of the old "Master's Part" which was conferred on those who wished to become the master of the lodge, followed by a secret ceremony of installation conferred by past masters of the lodge, and then – at the end of the twelve-month term of office – the Royal Arch Degree. In the beginning ordinary members did not take the "Master Mason Degree," although it is clear from Prichard that some lodges regularly conferred "The Master's Part" on their candidates. We also know that by the middle of the century eager Master Masons who wished to experience the Royal Arch Degree, but who could not take the time to become Master of the Lodge, would be put through abrief ceremony of being "installed" as Master, following which the Royal Arch Degree was then conferred. All this is to show that degrees in the 18th Century were in the process of development, and our present system only became the standard by the last half of the century.

The story of the development of our Masonic Ritual does not stop here. Time will not permit me to explain all the changes and permutations that took place in the last half of the 18th Century, and then on into the 19th Century. I can only give you a brief glimpse of how our early ritual evolved into what is practiced today around the

world. Today there are distinct families of ritual, known as "rites." The term "rite" comes from church nomenclature, where it describes different versions of the liturgy of the church. For example, there is the Roman Rite, practiced by the Roman Catholic Church; the Byzantine Rite, practiced by a branch of the Roman Catholic Church in Eastern Europe and Russia; and other similar "rites" of national churches and branches of both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Freemasonry, too, has its rites.

The rite practiced by American Masons is called the York Rite. It is the oldest of the rites in use today, and got its name from the old lodge at York, England, and possibly through the legend of Prince Edwin of York – a legend preserved in many of the Old Charges which were read at the admission of a mason before the development of our present ritual. The York Rite family of rituals is characterized by its austere character, by the use of questions and answers as a means of delivering the ritual, and by the use of a lecture at the end of a degree to explain the ceremonies. The American variant of the York Ritual is more properly called the Preston-Webb working, after the great Masonic ritualist, William Preston, whose lectures are the source of our own lectures today, and Thomas Smith Webb, who propagated these lectures in America. The ritual used in England – or more properly the rituals, because they have several different workings, are also York Rite rituals.

When Freemasonry spread to France in the 1730's, it experienced a great elaboration of the basic rituals received from England. This elaboration resulted, in part, in the creation of new degrees to supplement the three basic degrees of Ancient Craft Masonry. One of these degrees was called the "Scots Master Degree", and from this degree then entire type of degrees conferred in France derived their name – the Scottish Rite. Today, of course, we tend to think of the York Rite and the Scottish Rite as system of additional degrees beyond those of the Craft, and so they are. But before the name was used for additional degrees and organizations, the names referred to the type of ritual in use. The Scottish Rite rituals, for example, were more dramatic, and incorporated symbolism not found in the older York Rite rituals. Today you can see a Scottish Rite ritual for the Entered Apprentice Degree if you visit one of California's French lodges. They use the Scottish Rite ritual for their first degree instead of the York Rite ritual. If you have seen the degree, you will readily understand the difference.

But there are other rites in use around the world which are infrequently seen in this

country, if at all. The Swedish Rite of 1761 is one example. The Schroeder Rite – a German rite – is another. You will also find the Rectified Scottish Rite in use in Europe, a rite which is characterized by the incorporation of Martinism into its symbolism. (Martinism is a system of mystical Christianity which developed in the 18th Century in France.) You will also find the rites of Mizraim and of Memphis in existence – craft degrees which are a part of two systems developed in the first half of the 19th Century, and which are dependent upon Egyptian symbolism for their illustrations.