

The Degree of Mark Master Mason: History and Symbolism

History

With respect to the history of the degree, while there is evidence that a form of Mark Degree was in existence in Scotland as early as 1599, according to the earliest known English records Mark Masonry was introduced in a speculative body at Portsmouth on the 1st September 1769, when Thomas Dunkerley conferred the Mark Degree on brethren of the Royal Arch Chapter of Friendship No 257.

The Mark Degree was subsequently worked in many Lodges and even under the authority of the Old Grand Lodge of York, but the effect of the union in 1813 between the Ancients and Moderns was the specific recognition of the three Craft degrees including the Holy Royal Arch, thus completely excluding the Mark Degree. This led for many years to the active discouragement of the Mark Degree, nevertheless many Lodges continued to work the Degree and several leading Mark Masons formed their own Grand Mark Lodge in England in June 1856.

By 1860 a Concordat establishing a common ceremonial was entered into by the English Grand Mark Lodge and the Grand Chapter of Scotland and slowly the Mark Degree grew in popularity to make it, together with the Royal Arch, one of the most successful, supported Degrees in Freemasonry.

The position of Mark Masonry within the broader Masonic Fraternity differs by jurisdiction. In English Freemasonry, Mark Masonry continues to operate as a separate concordant Masonic body under its own Grand Lodge. Here in Canada, as well as in the United States and within Irish Freemasonry, the Mark Degree is taken in a Royal Arch Chapter, while in Scotland the Mark Degree can be received in two ways, either within a Royal Arch Chapter or separately in a Craft Lodge. Thus, with the exception of English Freemasonry the Mark Degree forms a pre-requisite to receiving the Royal Arch Degree.

Symbolism

There are three areas of symbolism with respect to the Degree: The discovery of the Keystone, the receipt of wages, and the choosing of a Mark. Together, I think they can help provide us with a deeper understanding of the symbolism of this important Degree.

The Discovery of the Keystone

One of major clues to the central themes of this degree lies in the fact that both the candidate and his guide are fellowcrafts. Although the Sr. Deacon is clothed as a Royal Arch Companion, the ritual clearly states that both he and the candidate are "Craftsmen" – as both submit work to the Overseers and receive their wages from the Senior Warden. In this respect, both the SD and candidate can be seen as representing two aspects of our development as Masons.

The SD, with his work that passes the test of the Overseer's square, is representative of the moral and intellectual character we have been instructed to develop through the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft degrees. The working tools of the FC are the S, L and PR, and if we are true craftsmen, our character should be able to pass the test of the Overseer's square.

In the closing of the Fellowcraft degree, the discovery of a sacred symbol in the centre of the building is also mentioned.

This points to the fact that through the development of character we open ourselves up to divine experience (however we, as Masons, choose to define that experience). This fact, to me, is what is being dramatized in the first part of the Mark Master Mason degree.

The candidate, with his keystone, represents this divine experience by bringing something unknown to the Overseer. The keystone, in this sense, represents our discovery of the divine or eternal – symbolically something greater than the presentation of square and upright thoughts and actions that doesn't fit in with the sensory world (recall that symbolically, the square & the number 4 are representative of the physical world). This discovery, represented by the keystone, does not correspond to our understanding of the physical world, but, as the Degree ritual states, it is of such a 'singular form and beauty' that we are unwilling to reject it.

Despite the initial willingness of the Overseers to accept the keystone, the Council of Overseers eventually rejects the keystone and heave it among the rubble. This is the crucial part of this part of the degree, as it points to the fact that our sensory-oriented minds will all too often reject divine revelation that does not conform to our understanding of the physical world. The degree is teaching us, therefore, to open our hearts to such experience and not cast it aside amongst the rubble.

It is of interest to look at this aspect of the MMM degree that is only briefly mentioned in our ritual, but which I had the opportunity to see performed in a more elaborate way at a MMM degree in Edinburgh, Scotland. In the Scottish MMM degree, after the keystone is rejected the WM asks the MO about the keystone and when he discovers it was rejected and thrown amongst the rubble, the MO is removed from his post and the SD and candidate search, and eventually re-discover, the keystone. In this sense the WM, as the symbol of ultimate divinity, again intervenes to allow for another opportunity to discover the keystone and the MO, as the representative of our judging minds, is removed from his post, thereby providing a dramatic representation of our minds become more open to divine experience.

The Wages that Are Our Due

The second dramatization in the MMM degree is that of the FC's being paid their wages. After the discovery of the keystone, the brethren who have recently submitted work are then directed to the SW's apartment to receive their wages. At this point the candidate is discovered as an impostor and threatened with having his hand cut off by the JW.

In this sense, the second part of the degree is providing a separate, but parallel narrative to the first part. In the first part, the candidate sees the Overseers, as representatives of our reasoning faculties, rejecting the keystone that they should have accepted – illustrating the difficulty of internalizing spiritual discovery – and seeing the Officers mistakenly reject the keystone. In the second part, it is the candidate who errs, by improperly seeking wages that were not his due.

The attempt to receive wages that were not due teaches us an important lesson of Masonry – just as the candidate found himself with the keystone in the first part of the degree, without having any explanation for why, so too must we await our spiritual wages rather than seek them out. The candidate is an impostor in this part of the degree in the sense that he is seeking wages rather than receiving them.

After the candidate is spared the punishment of the JW, he is brought to the WM to explain his circumstances. This is followed by the traditional lecture and communication of the secrets and working tools of the degree.

In the conclusion of the degree, the candidate once again walks in procession with the other craftsmen to receive his wages. This time, the other craftsmen are upset not because the candidate is an impostor, but instead because he has received the same wage that they have. At this point, one of the more important lectures of the degree is given, where the brethren are exhorted to receive their wages with gratitude, and told that the Grand Geometrician pays his wages based on our actions as Masons rather than the length of our Masonic experience, further reinforcing the lesson to all members of the Mark Master Mason Lodge that we should on the one hand open ourselves up to receiving divine or spiritual inspiration, but that at the same time to accept that spiritual progress is something that comes to us rather than something we seek out.

Inscribing Our Mark

In the course of the degree, we are presented with an explanation of the keystone and the letters HTWSSTKS (Hiram, the Widow's Son, sent to King Solomon). It is here where we can see why the Mark Master Mason degree follows the Master Mason degree, as we have a reference to Hiram Abiff, the Widows' son, and where we can see it as a bridge between the FC and MM degrees.

Although MMM forms the title of the degree, the mason's mark forms only a small portion of the degree – the working tools allude to a mason's mark. Why, then, is the MMM the title of the degree, and what relationship does it have to the previous teachings?

In my opinion, the idea of the mason's mark is what ties the degree together and provides the ultimate lesson of the degree. As mentioned above, in the first part of the degree we can view the guide and candidate as two aspects of our inner nature. The square work and the keystone are two separate entities and we eventually encounter difficulty passing the Overseers with the keystone.

In the second part of the degree we are taught that to be patient in accepting and receiving the spiritual wages that are our due – that grace will endue us with spiritual advancement that is commensurate with the development of our character.

At the conclusion of the ceremony we are directed to choose a mark to place in the Book of Marks. Our mark is placed within the centre of the keystone, and in this sense we are symbolically taking ownership over the divine inspiration we have received, as represented by the discovering, loss and return of the keystone. This keystone, including our individual mark, is represented on the penny we are presented with as Mark Master Masons.

Thus, as MMM's, we have learned to continue to develop the moral and intellectual faculties that we were instructed in in the EA and FC degrees, but to those lessons is added a further admonition that while the grace of spiritual rewards comes from diligent work and repeated efforts, we must also be keen enough to recognize this grace when it comes to us.

We must labour by education and the correction of our irregularities, as represented in the MMM working tools, and accept the spiritual 'wages' that flows from those labours, and if we attempt to receive spiritual enlightenment without first developing our character we will quickly be discovered as impostors. When those wages then come to us, we must accept them with gratitude as being justly earned.

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