

UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND

APPROVED ORATION



“PILLARS, STAIRS AND THE MIDDLE CHAMBER”

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LEVEL: BEGINNER

Second Degree

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Pillars, Stairs and the Middle Chamber

Thoughts on the Second Degree Tracing Board

At first sight, the Explanation of the Second Degree Tracing Board might seem to have little of substance and much irrelevant detail – who cares that there were 100 pomegranates in a row on the chapters surmounting the pillars?

However, it should not be so easily dismissed. There are, after all, some important aspects to give us cause for thought.

Firstly, Ritual is, of course, Ritual and NOT history.

We are largely left to work out for ourselves what lessons, if any, we take from it.

Some may not try to make *anything* of it.

Some may be very erudite and make more of it than others might be prepared to accept.

Much of the detail in the Second Degree Tracing Board can be found in the Volume of the Sacred Law, principally in the Old Testament Second Book of Chronicles, First Book of Kings and Judges.

If we recall the time when we first heard the explanation, we were probably struck at the amount of detail; for example, two rows of pomegranates on each chapter, one hundred in a row. But why give us this detail? Did we really need to know this? Perhaps a reason for this is a bit of literary sleight-of-hand? The parts which are Masonic fiction are embedded in bits which have biblical provenance to enhance their credibility. Hence the non-essential detail.

Regarding the ‘globes’ on the pillars; this is sometimes dismissed on the grounds that, when Solomon’s Temple was built around 1000 BC, they thought the world was flat. However, about 500BC Pythagoras proposed that it was round, about 350BC Aristotle convincingly argued that it was round and about 250BC, Eratosthenes measured the circumference with remarkable accuracy. So, though doubtful, the idea of a spherical earth just might have existed in Solomon’s time. However, this is irrelevant - the bit about the Celestial and Terrestrial globes is modern Masonic creativity but it gives an imaginative excuse to mention ‘Masonry Universal’ and to introduce the concept of its widespread appeal.

The section about the pillars being formed hollow to hold the ‘constitutional rolls’ is probably also Masonic fiction. What constitution? And these large heavy pillars would hardly be a convenient place to hold such rolls if they had existed. Surely, if there was anything of significance inside the pillars, the Second Book of Chronicles, which tells us how many pomegranates there were, would have said something. Or perhaps it was meant to be a secret!

However, hollow cylinders, often terracotta, were a normal means of storing valuable records in those days.

And what about our ancient Brethren going into the middle chamber of the Temple to receive their wages? – Surely more Masonic fiction.

Imagine the scene – the work is about to start, perhaps just a few pegs marking out the ground for the foundation of the intended structure. The Craftsmen, ready to start work, being informed that

they would receive their wages in the Middle Chamber which, according to the plan, would be up a Winding Staircase – and, unfortunately, it would be some time before either of them existed. So where did they go to get paid *before* they'd built the Middle Chamber? Did they have to work several months, or years, before being paid?

Taken literally, these superficially-simple bits of Ritual do not stand up to critical examination.

We could simply say that 'It's Ritual – it doesn't have to be historically or biblically accurate, or make sense, or be logical'

Or we could consider that those who wrote our Ritual knew what they were doing – that those anomalous sections were put there deliberately – to get us thinking. Thinking that, perhaps, veiled in allegory, there are other meanings.

As cylinders were used to store valuable records, so might the pillars represent ourselves, storing in us our personal records of our knowledge and conduct. And the Fellow Craft must pass between these pillars denoting 'In Strength' and 'to Establish', in progressing from the world outside the Temple to the porchway, the stairs and the Middle Chamber.

At this point, we might note that the expression - For God Said 'in strength I will establish this Mine House to stand firm for ever', does **not** appear as such in the VSL. The nearest we find is 'He shall build me an house and I will stablish his throne forever'. However, the version in our Ritual suits our purpose well.

Proceeding onwards, in our Ritual we say:

'The Entered Apprentices received a weekly allowance of corn, wine and oil; the Fellow Crafts were paid their wages in specie – that is, in coin - which they went to receive in the middle chamber of the Temple'

This is not the case in the Ritual in the United States, where the Fellow Crafts are paid in corn, wine and oil and there is no mention of 'specie'.

United States Ritual serves better to illustrate this nonsense of the 'wages'. Solomon the Wise would not have permitted any practice so uneconomic as sending workmen up a winding flight of stairs to a small Middle Chamber, to receive portions of corn, wine and oil which had to be brought up in advance, only to be carried back down in small lots by each worker! Even if the wages are in specie, it is still implausible.

Above all, we cannot believe that King Solomon would have the Middle Chamber of his Temple used as a wages office!

There is an important point in the Apprentices being paid in corn, wine and oil whereas the Fellowcrafts are paid in specie. The Apprentices receive basic sustenance - the Craftsmen are paid wages in a form which allows them to **choose** how they are spent. This is an important distinction which the US working has lost.

And then we come to 'the winding staircase'.

Although the legend of the Winding Stairs forms an important tradition of Ancient Craft Masonry, the only allusion to it in Scripture is to be found in a single verse in the sixth chapter of the First Book of Kings, and is in these words: "The door for the middle chamber was in the right

side of the house; and they went up with winding stairs into the middle chamber, and out of the middle into the third". Out of this slender material has been constructed an allegory, for the historical facts and the architectural details alike preclude any supposition that the legend, as it presented in the Second Degree of Masonry, is anything more than a magnificent philosophical myth.

A straight stair hides neither secret nor mystery at its top but ascent by a Winding Staircase requires courage to face the unknown.

Let us take this pictorial representation of the stairs, where we cannot fully see where we are going, yet leading to the place where the wages of labour are to be received, as an allegory to teach us the ascent of the mind from ignorance, through all the toils of study and the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, receiving here a little and there a little, adding something to the stock of our ideas at each step, until, in our middle chamber, we attain our reward.

So what are the wages of a Speculative Mason? Not corn, nor wine, nor oil nor, even, specie. All these are but symbols. The wages are the knowledge of a beautiful, yet abstruse, doctrine of Masonic symbolism.

So we have an apparently simple story, one in which even a cursory examination can expose many anomalies, yet one where further examination can lead us to something so much better.

This is the reward of the inquiring Mason; in this consist the wages of a Fellow Craft; he is directed to the truth, but must travel farther and ascend still higher to attain it.

And so, inside ourselves, we receive the 'wages' to which we are 'justly entitled'.

Note:

Much regarding the Pillars can be found in Second Chronicles Ch 3, v 1, Ch 4 v1-22, and First Kings Ch 7 v15-22

The 'winding stairs' are in First Kings Ch 6 v 7-8

The bit about 'cast in the plains of Jordan' etc is in Second Chronicles Ch 4, v 17 and the part about the winding staircase is in Ch 6, v8

The section 'He shall build me an house.. etc ' is in First Chronicles Ch 7 v12

The later section about the Ephraimites (not referred to here) is in Judges Ch12, v1-6