

UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND

APPROVED ORATION



“THE LETTER ‘G’”

Oration Number: OR08027

LEVEL: BEGINNER

Second Degree

This document is protected by copyright and it may not be copied, used, or distributed in any form or manner without the expressed permission of the United Grand Lodge of England.

THE LETTER 'G'

When the Second Degree tracing board is explained, at the closing stages we hear the presenting Brother say:

When our ancient Brethren were in the middle chamber of the Temple their attention was peculiarly drawn to certain Hebrew characters which are here depicted by the letter 'G', denoting God, the grand Geometrician of the Universe, to whom we must all submit and whom we ought humbly to adore.

And when the Lodge is closed in the Second Degree we hear the following:

WM. Brother Junior Warden, in this position, what have you discovered?

JW. A sacred symbol.

WM. Brother Senior Warden, where is it situated?

SW. In the Centre of the building.

WM. To whom does it allude?

JW. The Grand Geometrician of the Universe

The letter 'G' is often seen in the centre of the square and compasses where Masonic objects are featured. In many English lodge rooms the letter 'G' is to be seen hanging in the centre of the ceiling, and is also on every Second Degree Tracing Board. In American lodges it is over the Master's chair. In other English-

speaking lodges it also usually has a place; but is there represented by a triangle containing the Hebrew name for God. It has been maintained that where the letter 'G' is displayed, it should be one of the most prominent items viewed on entering a lodge room, and should therefore be readable from the west. Most lodge rooms where there is a letter 'G', will in fact have it facing west.

The absence of the letter 'G' in foreign lodges is a key to much of the confusion surrounding the symbol. A moment's thought will show that 'G' can be the initial letter of the word 'God' in English – but in very few other languages. It is reasonably certain that the letter 'G' was not used in English lodges as meaning 'God', until late in the 18th century, although it was a feature of lodges, possibly during the 17th century and quite early in the 18th century.

Dr George Oliver, a well-known Masonic author of the 19th century, took the symbol without question as referring to the Great Architect of the Universe. But an earlier writer, William Hutchinson, says in his book *Spirit of Masonry*, that the name of God is only part of the Masonic import of the letter. This significant letter, he says:

...denotes Geometry, which to Artificers is the science by which all their labours are calculated and formed; and to Masons, contains the determination, definition, and proof of the order, beauty, and wonderful wisdom of the power of God in his creation.

How far back the letter 'G' was used as a symbol for geometry can only be guessed at, but we are told that a book of geography

printed in Strasburg, in 1525, contains an ornamental margin which included a pillar, a small part of the spring of the arch above it, with foliage, cherub, and fluting decoration. On the base, in a panel, are the square and compasses with in the centre, the letter 'G' "believed to stand for Geometry". In view of the date of this publication, 1525, the statement of Mackey, a well known Masonic author, that the letter 'G' is a modern symbol "which can be traced back to the word 'God', and not to 'Geometry'", is not convincing. The continental Masons who inscribed the name of God, or Jehovah, in Hebrew letters within the triangle, and displayed this in their lodges – as we do today in Royal Arch Chapters – were really looking back to an ecclesiastical custom of the 16th century.

The majority of Masonic writers today believe that the letter 'G' refers to Geometry, and the old catechisms also point that way. This is a catechism, printed in 1730:

- Q. Why was you made a Fellow-Craft?
- A. For the sake of the letter G.
- Q. What does that G denote?
- A. Geometry or the fifth Science.

In the course of the 18th century there was much ritual-writing, leading to great diversity between various Masonic workings. For example, in some lodges, if we are to draw conclusions from an *exposé* of 1730, the letter 'G' was given a definitely Christian significance:

- Q. When you came into the middle what did you see?

- A. The Resemblance of the Letter G.
- Q. Who doth that G denote?
- A. One that's greater than you.
- Q. Who's greater than I, that am a Free and Accepted Mason, the Master of a Lodge?
- A. The Grand Architect and Contriver of the Universe, or He that was taken up to the Top of the Pinnacle of the Holy Temple.

When that catechism was published the letter 'G' was a symbol of a Fellow Craft lodge. In May 1742, two Freemasons who were in trouble with Grand Lodge organized a procession of mock-masons, and from a newspaper report of the day we learn that the letter 'G' then signified geometry, or the fifth science, for the sake of which "all Fellow-Crafts are made". This letter G is the essence of the Fellow-Craft's lodge. Indeed, so closely identified was the letter 'G' with the Fellow Craft that we find him referred to as a "letter-G man". The same newspaper report tells us that when the lodge was raised from the First to the Second Degree, a square was placed in the centre of the blazing star, so that Brethren could tell in which degree the lodge was working.

The symbolical letter 'G' is deservedly regarded as one of the most sacred of Masonic emblems. It conveys to the minds of the brethren the idea of God and of Geometry – it binds heaven to earth, the divine to the human and the infinite to the finite. We are taught as Masons to regard the universe as one of the grandest of all symbols; revealing to men, in all ages, the ideas which are eternally revolving in the mind of Divinity, and which it is their duty

to reproduce in their own lives. Thus God and Geometry, the material and the spiritual, were constantly united in the thoughts of the ancient masons – they laboured hard, not only to construct magnificent structures, but also to build a temple of divine thoughts and of ever-growing virtues for the soul to dwell in.

We can quote great authorities on the subject. In 1643, Sir Thomas Browne wrote, in *Religio Medici*, “God is like a skilful geometrician”. Plato, four centuries B.C., said that “God is a geometer”, that is, one versed in geometry, a geometrician. Bertrand Russell, in more recent times, said that “the influence of geometry upon philosophy has been profound”, and that “mathematical objects, which are eternal and not in time, can be conceived in God’s thoughts”.

An old Masonic writer once said that much of what has been written concerning the letter ‘G’ in Freemasonry is far more imaginative than useful. A wise view being that God Himself and Geometry have much in common, and that today we may regard the symbol as standing for each and both of them. With those words in mind we shall not be far wrong when we teach the Fellow Craft that the letter ‘G’ denotes God who is the Grand Geometrician of the Universe.