

One of the great treasures of Freemasonry is its ability to take the greatest and the best teachings from all religions, arguing that as all religions descend from the One True Religion, so all divinely-inspired aphorisms, parables, psalms and prose are equally worthy of our contemplation, regardless of their source, so long as that religion is recognized as one of the great religions. It is not surprising, therefore, that among the scriptures (i.e. writings) cited in our many branches and rituals, we find quotations from the Torah, Historical Books, Prophets and Wisdom Writings of the Jewish faith, New Testament quotes from the Christian faith, excerpts from Hindu writings and even occasional references to Islamic verse.

Although Freemasonry was seen as being predominately Deist (i.e. exclusively focused on the existence of a Supreme Being or *Deus Ex Machina*, rather than cleaving to a particular belief system), in the Royal Arch Degrees we find the degrees predominantly predicated on the Historical books of Judaism and a number of references to New Testament stories and events. This offers further support to those theories which suggest that Freemasonry was born out of Operative Masonry, whose roots lay as much in the erection of the great European cathedrals as in the building of castles and other secular buildings, and whose involvement the so-called Mystery Plays or Miracle Plays of medieval times may well have been the source of the myths, legends and biblical stories on which most of our present-day Masonic ritual is based. Examples of the Judaic side of the legacy – which Christians also know as the *Old Testament*, include rituals surrounding the stories of King Solomon's Temple, Noah, Enoch, David and Jonathan, Zerubbabel, Jehoiakin; the list goes on . Interestingly, New Testament events are rarely used (and this despite the fact that Freemasonry is claimed to have been founded in a country where Christianity was – and is – the official religion of the monarch and the establishment: England. Does this in itself help to support those claims that our origins are much more ancient...?); and most of the purely Christian Degrees focus on later historical events beginning after the tenth Century C.E. Most references to the New Testament focus purely on the teachings of the rabbi Jesus, rather than events in his life, for these are as universally applicable as many of the Judaic writings. The Christian side of our traditional English legacy also includes the fact that our older Lodges still bear the name of Christian Saints; that we revere the memory of the Holy Saints John; that we have an altar in our Lodge Rooms; that the Deacons bear wands reminiscent of the Ushers or Church Wardens in English churches; and so forth.

So, the texts selected from the New Testament in our rituals appear to have been carefully selected so as to have a universal message. Remember that there were few Moslems in England at the dawn of Freemasonry, and that Jews would have been well-versed in Christian teachings, living as they were in a country which was not only Protestant by nature, but at that time quite liberal in its attitude toward *certain* religious beliefs. Remember Benjamin Disraeli, the Victorian Prime Minister, was Jewish: and yet no member of the Royal family could marry a Roman Catholic without giving up their claim to the throne! And Pocahontas was welcomed as an honored guest in the Royal Court. In a time when the bible was the only book most families could afford to buy, and when anyone would have read or heard the book in its entirety at least three times before entering Freemasonry, a man going through the Royal Arch Degree, for example, would instantly have identified and known the stories being used, and would have focused immediately on the use Masonry was making of the story to communicate a higher meaning. It is certain that, two hundred years ago, no one would have gone through the degree and said

(as a candidate said to me a few years ago): “That was a really interesting degree. Now tell me again, who was this Zerubbabel character?”!

So only texts from the New Testament with a universal message were used, and it is clear that the texts were chosen with great care. In the historical Jesus we have a teacher, a Rabbi, a man who spoke Aramaic and preached and debated in synagogues. Now, to be a little controversial, a Rabbi would certainly have had to be married. Why was this fact not mentioned in the scriptures? I am not going down the road of the Da Vinci Code or Holy Blood, Holy Grail here! No claims that the marriage in Cana was Jesus’ wedding, or that he married Mary of Magdalen: merely that we hear little of his family life since it was not relevant to the scribes who posthumously wrote his story. But it was quite likely that he was married, and had a number of brothers and sisters (of course women would not have been mentioned in history at that time). Indeed, his brothers – Thomas, for example – are even mentioned in the scriptures, and the Gnostic scriptures from Nag Hammadi are even more explicit on the matter. The point being made is that, while the details of life extraordinary life may be debated by those of other religious persuasions, his teachings as a Rabbi are both accepted, studied and appreciated by many Jewish groups and are explicitly quoted in the Koran. The man may be controversial, but his teachings are accepted as having a universal appeal.

So let’s examine the last lesson which satisfying explains the cryptic comment of the Senior Warden at the closing of a Blue Lodge: “...pay the Craft their wages, if any be due, that none may go away dissatisfied...”. What are we to make of it? It doesn’t seem to belong to the rest of the Mark Degree, which focuses on the theme of the ‘rejected stone’. Is it an integral part of the Degree; or is it teaching us a new lesson, one of equal importance in our spiritual development?

The parable itself, read at face value, makes no sense at all, particularly in today’s climate. Who in their right minds would accept working for twelve hours, and receive the same wages a people who worked only one hour? In the scripture workmen – meaning us – are always depicted as small-minded, mean and jealous, quick to complain and even – as in the case of the similar parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, which appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Thomas – prepared to kill the son of the vineyard owner and take over vineyard themselves, in what is take to be a thinly-veiled reference to the crucifixion.

Vineyards feature frequently in biblical narrative, and the symbol is often used to signify the nation of Israel. Notice that the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen continues with the lines: “*When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?*” If this second parable provides such an intimate link to the idea of a rejected stone, shouldn’t we take both parables to be reflected in the closing ceremony of the Mark Degree? After all, if the Nazarene depicted himself as the keystone, surely the act of heaving this stone over among the rubbish suddenly becomes worthy of our serious consideration. The act of throwing the

stone away, to be rediscovered later, becomes a very powerful symbol, and even casts the role of King Solomon in a new light, rather more in line with the *deus ex machina* of the Mystery Plays. I would hasten to add that modern exegesis casts doubt on whether Jesus actually related this parable, and indicates it may well have been interpolated from Old Testament teachings by the committees assembling the gospels, and added as a later date. However, without the benefit of 20th century exegesis and access to the Nag Hammadi scripts, our forebears living in a Christian environment may well have been trying to communicate a story rather more profound than the one we now see. I do not intend to pursue this line of reasoning further: I will leave that up to the reader to ponder or leave this as they wish.

Now we have to ask ourselves a final question: when the Right Worshipful Master turns the VSL around in order to read this piece of scripture to the complaining workmen, he says a curious thing: will you abide by the law? Yet this reading is neither from the Constitutions nor any law book: it is a parable. What is the law to which he is referring? Now, this parable is usually claimed to refer to the fact that one may be baptized into Christianity at any time in one's life, and is still equally assured of entrance into heaven. This reminds us of that famous comment by St. Augustine of Hippo: "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet...". Now that would be a strange law to follow!

No. I believe the law referred to is a law different to traditional interpretation, and for the hearts and minds of Masons only. This is only a personal opinion, however. For me the most important line of the Senior Warden's closing speech in the Blue Lodge is this: "...that none may go away dissatisfied." In other words, we should not be jealous of those who have more than us, or who are richer, more famous, more talented than us. When we enter the Lodge we leave all outward signs of difference behind us. But we also need to learn to leave behind the memory of these differences, and that is far harder for us to do. What our hands do our hearts must do also. Jealousy has no part in Brotherhood. We should extend a spirit of humility and joy in our everyday lives as well as within the Lodge. We should celebrate others' good fortune, applaud their successes and encourage their talents. This can be far harder even than contributing to worthy charities and helping those less fortunate than ourselves.

This is the law which the Right Worshipful Master refers to, the natural law of harmony.

Finally, some questions for debate:

1. Have you noticed any other explicitly Christian symbolism in the York Rite degrees? Are these universally applicable? Have you found any Christian symbolism used which would perhaps challenge other religions, or are all the teachings used acceptable to all religions?
2. Can you think of any other phrases or symbols in the Blue Lodge Degrees which are taken and amplified in the York Rite Degrees?
3. Corn, wine and oil feature often in the parables: corn in the sower and the seeds, wine in Cana and the vineyard parables, and oil in the seven wise and foolish virgins, and in the anointing of the Nazarene's feet. Is this a coincidence, or a deliberate Masonic attempt to link what we do at the dedication of a corner stone to the scriptures?