

Secrets and Mysteries

An Introduction for the Entered Apprentice by RW Bro. Michael D. Yule

TODAY'S PAPER is intended to provide a short introduction for an Entered Apprentice into what exactly it is that I believe Freemasonry is all about, although I am hoping that there may be a snippet or two in here that will be of interest to more senior brethren as well. Before starting, I will add my customary disclaimer that the ideas presented herein are those of the author, and do not in any way indicate that these ideas are the official views of this Grand Jurisdiction, the Lodge of Education and Research, or any other freemason in either body. Freemasonry is intended to be, among other things, an intellectual journey, and the ideas and proposals contained in this paper are intended to give the contemplative among you additional food for thought, and are my thoughts in their entirety.

As many of us remember, the first steps into Freemasonry are filled with both anticipation and apprehension, largely because there is a feeling that somehow things will be different after the initiation but that how it will be different is unknown, and how this will be achieved is also unknown.

It is this sense of the unknown, this 'mystery' that is one of the keys to the experience. The dictionary defines 'mystery' as a profound secret, something wholly unknown or kept cautiously concealed and therefore exciting curiosity or wonder, something that has not been or cannot be explained. How this relates to the EA degree is the basis of this paper.

Freemasonry is a philosophical descendant of the Mystery traditions such as those of Eleusis, Dionysus, and Orpheus. There are many, both within the Craft and without, that would discount any attempt to link Freemasonry with these ancient roots. And no doubt they are right insofar as their arguments typically revolve around the formation of lodges and direct linkages of ritual wording, symbolism, movement within the lodge, lodge hierarchy, *etc.* But these critics are missing the point entirely, and are in fact making the argument that because the various Christian churches do not conduct their rituals in exactly the same way that Jesus and the apostles did, that there is no linkage between them, which is of course incorrect. I might additionally add that these arguments often are given by those that tend towards the view that Freemasonry is nothing more than a charitable organization – dedicated to assisting others less fortunate – and while no doubt this is a worthy reason for a brotherhood to exist, and as we know freemasons are very active in such endeavours, it is clear to me that we could quite capably raise money, assist others, and contribute to the relief of the poor and distressed without any of the ritual trappings that are undertaken each time a lodge is convened and each time a degree is conferred, as do our friends in various other organizations whose names no doubt will occur readily to you.

As we all know, Freemasonry is not a religion, and in fact is accepting of all who profess only a belief in a Supreme Deity; however they choose to define him or her. I include the feminine divine here at the risk of being the first ever to do so within this space, as most of our cultural traditions tend to view the supremacy of a single male deity, and yet there have been many and still are, to whom creation is a feminine trait not a male one. Patriarchal attitudes have taken hold of the west for the most part however, and so virtually all reference in mainstream religious thought is to a male deity. I might also add at this point however that most esoteric traditions of even patriarchal religious systems include a female counterpart to the male Creator. In esoteric Judaism, called Qabbalah, this creatrix is the Shekinah, whose presence figures in several masonic degrees in Concordant bodies for instance. Even within the bounds of

traditional Catholic Christianity the adoration of Mary Mother of Jesus has aspects of the traditional Goddess worship of many cultures prior to the ascension of the male warrior deity originally worshiped primarily by cultures from the north and east of Europe. In any event, some lodges also require that candidates state that they believe that the Great Architect of the Universe will punish evil and reward good, as well as that he or she has revealed his or her will in a Volume of Sacred Law, but I personally consider these as late aberrations in the masonic tradition and discount their validity to the Craft.

Neither of these questions are consistent with the avowed intention of the Craft to accept as initiates those who profess a belief in Deity, as they go well beyond this requirement and assume to some degree a Judeo-Christian background, or at least a written rather than an oral tradition in the candidates' belief system, not to mention a punishment tradition that is inconsistent with some beliefs.

Anyone who is interested in the traditions of matriarchal deities is well advised to read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves.

In any event, since the Eleusinian Mysteries have been extinct as an organized event for tens of centuries, it may not be immediately clear how the statement can be made that there is any connection between the conferral of a masonic degree and the rites performed in Greece at Eleusis so long ago. The answer is partly in the work that we do and what we know about the work that they did, but more importantly it is in the results that each strived for.

Before going much further, let's explore a little what the Eleusinian Mysteries were all about. Eleusis is (or rather was) a town about 20km from Athens above the bay of Eleusis, and was founded about 2000 BCE.

The rites of the religion of Demeter were carried out there until the rise of Christianity – this is known by the successive erection of temples on the site throughout Roman times, and in the time of Solon (died 559 BCE) these rites were established as one of the most important Athenian festivals. The temples were destroyed by the Goths around 400 CE when the rites were proscribed by Theodosius.

The fundamental background to the rites of Eleusis revolves around the story of Demeter and Persephone. Demeter, also called Ceres (where we get the word 'cereal') was the goddess responsible for agriculture – the life and death cycle played out each year when the seed sown in the ground at the end of the year rises again in the spring with new life. Persephone, also called 'Kore', her daughter, as those of you who remember your Greek religious stories, was abducted and raped by Hades the god of the kingdom of death and became his wife. Demeter searched all over the world for her daughter and eventually arrived at Eleusis. There she was welcomed by (the stories differ here between authors) a poor woman who welcomed her into her home, not knowing that she was a goddess. In thanks for the hospitality she was shown, Demeter contrived to make the woman's son immortal – she fed him with nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods, and one night, to complete the transition to immortality she brought the boy to the hearth fire and was about to immolate him when the woman of the house awoke. Seeing her son about to be thrust into the flames, she screamed, at which point the goddess revealed herself and admonished the woman that had she not interrupted, the boy would have been made immortal. In consolation however, Demeter offered to teach the inhabitants of the town her secrets if they would build a temple to her.

In the meantime, the daughter was still missing, and after the temple had been built Demeter secreted herself there and in her sorrow vowed that she would not allow any seed to grow until Persephone had been found. Eventually word came to her of what had happened to

her daughter, and she negotiated with Zeus to obtain her release from her marriage to Hades. Zeus decreed that she could return unless in her time in the world of the dead she had eaten anything. Since Persephone had eaten six seeds of the pomegranate while she was with Hades she was doomed to stay there for six months of the year, and could return to the living world for the other six. The seeds of the earth, then, are reborn and grow when Persephone returns, and they die again when she returns to the land of the dead.

The end of the agricultural year, when the plants are dying, is symbolized by the sorrow of Demeter as she knows that her daughter will be leaving her and returning to the dead lands for the next six months. On Persephone's release in the spring, the plants come back to life as Demeter's happiness is restored with the return of her daughter.

There are parallels here to various other festivals in a variety of religious systems – for instance Christianity. The rising of the Christ in the spring, renewed and reborn at Easter is an obvious analogy. This is especially so when one considers the root of the word 'Easter' – which is 'oestre', an Anglo-Saxon goddess who symbolized the rebirth of the day at dawn and the rebirth of life in the spring. As a possibly interesting aside, this word, oestre, is also related to fertility in mammals, as it describes being in heat, or in rut. No wonder the egg is an Easter symbol. The death of an old life, and the rebirth into a new one through a ritual drama is a fundamental part of most major religious systems today as well – an example is baptism in the Christian church. It may not be immediately apparent to the new Entered Apprentice how this relates to the initiatory experience that he underwent, however the parallels are there for the contemplative. Other parts of other dramas will doubtless occur to the more senior brethren as being parallel in intent. For the Entered Apprentice who experienced the Ancient Work I would suggest reviewing the challenges given by the Junior Warden, the Senior Warden, and the Worshipful Master after the first perambulation around the lodge and the answers given by the Senior Deacon, while the candidate is still hoodwinked, for some evidence. Other parallels will hopefully become clear in a few minutes. While we don't know the exact rituals that were practiced at Eleusis we can certainly do some evocative imagining.

The archaeologist George Mylonas directed the final excavations of Eleusis, which was the site of the Mysteries for two thousand years. During that time multitudes of women and men from all over the world of the ancient Greeks participated in these rites, and, if we can believe the poets, playwrights, and philosophers, drew great strength from them. Pindar wrote: "Blessed is he who has seen these things before he goeth beneath the hollow earth; for he understandeth the end of mortal life, and the beginning (of a new life) given of G-d" (from 'The Odes of Pindar'). Cicero, Sophocles, and Aristotle likewise extolled the Mysteries in their plays and other writings. Greek and Roman political figures such as Pericles, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian considered their experiences there moving and joyful. And some of the most profound passages in the plays of Aeschylus were considered so close to the essence of the Mysteries that the playwright came under the scrutiny of Athenian law until it was proved that he had never been initiated, and therefore could not have revealed the Mysteries in his works.

Mylonas expressed his frustration with the lack of information he had been able to gather in a life dedicated to finding the true Eleusis at the end of his book *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* – he concludes: For years, since my early youth, I have tried to find out what the facts were. Hope against hope was spent against the lack of monumental evidence; the belief that inscriptions would be found on which the Hierophants had recorded their ritual and its meaning has faded completely; the discovery of a subterranean room filled with the archives of the cult, which dominated my being in my days of youth, is proved an unattainable dream,

since neither subterranean rooms nor archives for the cult exist at Eleusis... Eleusis has puzzled scholars for centuries. Much has been discovered about the preparatory and public celebrations, the preliminary processions and purifications, the Demeter-Kore myth cycle, and the nature of certain processions and lesser rites. Many psychologists such as Carl Jung and other scholars have created a large storehouse of intuitions and speculations. Many would now agree that a profound religious experience must have occurred, repeated year after year, a psychic reality that succeeded again and again.

At one level, I think, all Mystery traditions involve processes of growth and regeneration, confrontations with birth, death, the source of life, and the relationship of human beings to the cosmos. It can be considered that rituals are really the re-enactment of a spiritual drama, allowing the participant to enter into the drama of life itself, of joining with his god or goddess in an achievement of unity so that growth, the true purpose of ritual, is achieved.

Above and beyond the murky area of historical and geographical connections of Freemasonry and Mystery traditions such as those of Demeter and Persephone, the philosophical connections are real. What little we know of the Mysteries seems to indicate that these rites emphasized (as the Craft, at its best, does today) experience as opposed to dogma, and metaphor and myth as opposed to doctrine. Both the Mysteries and Freemasonry emphasize initiatory processes that lead to a widening of perceptions. Neither emphasizes theology, belief, or the written word. In both, participants expect to lead normal lives in the world, as well as attain spiritual enrichment.

Aidan Kelly, a writer on various Mystery traditions, writes: The Great Mysteries of Eleusis were, in large part, archetypal of the Mystery religions. According to Karl Kerényi, when Athens annexed Eleusis about 600B CE and made its Mysteries the state religion of Attica, the Athenians passed a law to protect the secrets of the Mysteries. This law, however, distinguished two types of secrets, the "Lower" and the "Higher". The "Lower secrets" were those that could be told to another person by word, gesture, or whatever; these were called "ta aporrheta, the forbidden", and the law applied only to them – hence their name. Why didn't the law apply to the "Higher secrets"? The latter were called "ta arrheta, the ineffable", and it was recognized in the law itself that these secrets could not be communicated except by the Mysteries themselves, hence they needed no protection by a mere law.

It is the process, and the experience, not the secrets, that are the mystery of the Mysteries. And so it is with the mysteries in Freemasonry.

A mystery can't be told or even easily shown someone, while a secret can be told to just about anyone and they can tell it to somebody else. And it will be the same secret. And yet there are an amazing number 10 of people, even freemasons that seem to believe that the two terms are synonymous. The frustrating thing about the Mysteries for new freemasons, and those that think about it at all after they are more experienced, is that they cannot be taught, they must be experienced. In fact, telling most people the surface-seeming substance or "secrets" can blind them to the depth of the real Mysteries, the great sea of the unteachable. If it were as easy as telling to introduce someone to the Mysteries, then those who have perceived them would simply tell, and all people would become wise and aware. But when people try to tell, the things that are said are either understandable but not true or true but not understandable. It is because the experience of the initiation is the key, and not the written word of the ritual, that it is so important for a Freemason to attend degrees, the same degrees, over and over and over again. And to participate in them – for by becoming a part of the ritual a freemason becomes immersed

in the Mystery and has the opportunity once again to add a little more to his knowledge of the unknowable.

It will be clear from a study of the EA degree that the primary lesson is secrecy, and this is developed primarily in the obligation, where the candidate is bound by oath not to reveal any of the secrets of Freemasonry unlawfully. The commonest interpretation of this is that the words, grips, and signs that are revealed to the candidate are not to be disclosed to those that have not been initiated. This interpretation is fully consistent with the Athenian Law against revealing the "Lower secrets" of Eleusis – as these physical things are the "Lower secrets" of Freemasonry. The "Higher secrets" are the ritual itself – all those things that happen that are considered the mundane trappings of the ritual but which are, in fact, the true essence of the initiation. And the implication is that it does not matter whether or not the ritual is published to others, as it has been by any number of people, as they cannot possibly derive any benefit from it unless it is performed for them as it is in a consecrated lodge of freemasons.

For those of you who assist in the conferral of degrees this point must be strongly emphasized. The ritual is the Mystery. This is why it needs to be performed as expertly as possible, with the proper frame of mind of all involved. The setting, the words, the ritual clothing – all are intended to create in the candidate the set of requirements that will allow for a transcendent experience. This ritual space is consecrated by the opening ceremonies and invocation of Deity, whose symbols are placed on the altar to ensure that Deity is present to witness the obligation of the candidate. Different symbols are placed for each Deity that is professed by the candidate. I am, of course, referring to the Volume of Sacred Law. The reason that atheists are not permitted initiation is not so much that the obligation would be void insofar as no oath is binding if sworn to a Deity in whom one has no belief, but rather because that Deity must be present at the obligation in order for the candidate to ascend towards him or her as a result of the ritual.

Of course there is another component to make the initiation successful, and that is the candidate. The candidate must be ready to accept the initiation in the correct spirit for it to be successful. He, as well as the ritual space, must also be clean, both spiritually and physically, and this is no doubt the reason that he must pray with the lodge at his first entrance, and why the answer to the question "Where were you first prepared to be a freemason?" is "In my heart". The candidate's ability to make the initiation successful and derive a benefit from it is also why there is a visit to his home by three members of the lodge prior to his application being balloted on. Therefore it is necessary that the Committee of Investigation be thorough and attentive to any detail that would make the candidate unable to appreciate the ritual that is to be performed.

What must be remembered is that the Entered Apprentice degree is simply an initiation, to prepare the candidate to receive higher mysteries.

The mysteries of Freemasonry, as in Eleusis, are a process, and each step is intended to prepare the candidate for the one to follow. So, in the Entered Apprentice degree we have the spiritual rebirth and dedication to Deity that is necessary for the understanding of those things yet to come. This is illustrated in part by the entrance into the lodge proper, as into the world, from the womb represented by the preparation room and the prayer and obligation representing the dedication to Deity. The lectures are, for the most part, a description utilizing Judeo-Christian mythology of the processes, myth, and ritual that had been undergone during the drama.

This does not in any way invalidate their application to other myth systems, and in fact one of the lessons that the astute Entered Apprentice will perceive is that the interpretation of

the symbols can be done in other myth systems as well and if properly understood will result in the same lesson being learned.

As an example, at his first entrance to the Lodge, the Entered Apprentice is received on the point of a sharp instrument (a sword, or a spear) at his naked left breast, which to those Christians among us will be immediately evocative of the piercing by the centurion Longinus of the left breast of Jesus while he was on the cross, before he entered his new life in the otherworld. The parallels to entering the lodge are obvious. This does not invalidate the reasoning given by the Senior Deacon, that this was to be a reminder to your conscience should you ever presume to reveal the secrets of Freemasonry unlawfully, and in fact it more deeply impresses the idea that the sharp instrument can be used as an instrument of torture to the flesh. In fact, this sharp instrument, if seen as a spear, can also be that which heals, insofar as while the candidate and brother does remember the injunction and it affects his life in the intended fashion, it can be said to have healed him. This is evocative of yet another tradition, in which the hero Achilles wounds Telephus with his spear in a skirmish on his way to the Trojan War, and only by application of the spear again to Telephus is he able to be healed.

The hoodwink blinds the candidate, and while it is true that it would be possible to remove him from the lodge without him ever having seen even the form thereof as a result of it being imposed on him, I prefer to think that it is rather a veil than a blindfold, and represents the darkness with which a candidate approaches the truth, represented by the symbols of his Deity on the altar, and after having been consecrated to that Deity the veil is lifted and he is able to see for the first time. It must be the first time, because he has been born into the lodge, as was previously discussed. This veil is also the Abyss that stands between the Supernal Sephirot and those below that represent the sensual world in the Qabalah, and has the same meaning.

To summarize before ending, it is clear to the author that Freemasonry is a vastly older tradition than most recognize. The issue of whether there is a written pedigree with lodge minutes is irrelevant. What matters is what we do in the lodge, and what we do is ritual. Ritual that is intended in its initiatory aspects to allow a freemason to come closer to his divinity, and to be able to feel, if not to intellectualize, that process. With no doctrine and no dogma, the rituals of Freemasonry come closer to those of the initiatory traditions of the Eleusinians and others than to any other set of rituals, and it is this simple fact, this acknowledgement of the divine with many faces that allows those who are ready to truly experience the masonic tenets of brotherly love, relief, and truth.

I would like to end this little talk with a quote, attributed to Hermes Trimegistus: "Then only will you see it, when you cannot speak of it, for the knowledge of it is deep silence and suppression of all the senses." And that pretty much says it all.

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