

THE STORY
OF
HIRAM ABIFF

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PREFACE

The story or legend of Hiram Abiff is one of great interest to members of the Craft. Following upon the publication of my "Emblems of Freemasonry" in which there are various references to the principal architect, I received a number of requests for a booklet that would clearly and succinctly set forth the facts as these could be gleaned from the voluminous literature of Freemasonry. This I did to the best of my ability, and the fact that the booklet has enjoyed a wide circulation may be regarded as evidence that I did not fail. I hope this new edition will also meet with favour from the brethren.

WILLIAM HARVEY.

THE STORY OF HIRAM A BIFF

THE outstanding figure in modern Freemasonry is undoubtedly the widow's son who is known to members of the Fraternity under the somewhat obscure name of Hiram Abiff. He dominates Craft Masonry, and that in spite of the fact that neither the Entered Apprentice nor the Fellow-Craft knows anything at all about him. It is true that, when the Master Mason recites what is called "the first part of the traditional history," to the Fellow-Craft who is on his way to the secrets of the third degree, he pays the Fellow-Craft the compliment of saying, "As you are doubtless aware," Hiram was the principal architect at the building of King Solomon's Temple.. But if the Fellow-Craft is so informed, he must have acquired the knowledge apart altogether from Freemasonry as, up to that particular moment, no glimpse of the widow's son has been obtained in all the ceremonial of the First and Second Degrees. From that point onwards, however, he is chief actor in the drama, and the legend of Hiram is the most characteristic part in the ritual of the Order.

Hiram, like many other notable men in the history of the world, was distinguished in the manner of his death as that is set forth in the legend, and the dramatic circumstances attending the tragedy are what give amplitude to his biography. Beyond the time, place, and means of his murder, Freemasonry knows little about the man, nor, apart from Freemasonry, are many particulars to be gleaned. All that is known of him is contained in the Volume of the Sacred Law, and even there there is confusion, and one statement that in the opinion of Bro. Robert Freke Gould stamps the Masonic legend as a myth.

According to the author of the Second Book of Chronicles (Chap. ii.) Solomon sent messengers to Hiram, King of Tyre, to acquaint that friendly sovereign with the fact that he contemplated erecting a Temple, and inviting him to furnish men and materials for the prosecution of the work. Solomon's first demand was for a specially gifted craftsman.

"Send me now," he says, "a man cunning to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in iron, and in purple, and crimson, and blue, and that can skill to grave with the cunning men that are with me in Judah, and in Jerusalem:"

The King of Tyre received the embassy with cordiality, and returned a favourable answer to Solomon.

"I have sent a cunning man," he says, "endued with understanding. . . The son of a woman of the daughters of Dan, and his father was "a man of Tyre."

The account given in the First Book of the Kings (Chap. VII) differs somewhat so far as the parentage of the man is concerned. There it is stated that he was "a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali." The author or editor of Kings agrees with the Chronicler that Hiram's father was a Tyrian, adding that he was "a worker in brass." Josephus describes him as of Naphtali on his mother's side, his father being Ur of the stock of Israel. It is not easy to reconcile these differences. One Biblical student - Giesebrecht - suggests that the dislike felt by the editor of Kings to the idea of the Temple being built by a half-Phoenician caused him to insert the words

"a widow of the tribe of Naphtali," the alteration of the phrase "of the daughters of Dan" into "of the tribe of Naphtali," being the more permissible, since Dan lay in the territory of Naphtali.

The clear points that emerge are that Hiram was of mixed race, the son of a brassworker, and a man so high in his profession as to have secured the patronage of his King, and to have been deemed worthy to uphold the reputation of his country. His exalted position is inferred from the description given by the author of the Chronicles who alludes to him as "Hiram Abi," and the word "Abi," meaning "my father," is usually taken in the sense of "master," a title of respect and distinction.

The name is undoubtedly Phoenician, but there is some confusion, as to its actual form. "Hiram" is the more common rendering, but the author of the Chronicles adheres to the spelling "Hiram," and other writers adopt the variant "Hirom." Mr J. F. Stenning says that it is equivalent to "Ahirom," and means "the exalted one." According to Movers, Hiram or Hiram. is the name of a diety, and means "the coiled or twisted one," but other scholars regard this derivation as very improbable.

Whatever his real parentage, and whatever the exact meaning of his name, the widow's son of Freemasonry reached Jerusalem and was thereafter intimately identified with the building of the Temple. What exact share did he have in that great work ?

The editors of "The Jewish Encyclopaedia " point out that there is an essential difference as regards the nature of his technical specialty between the account preserved in the First Book of Kings and that in the Second Book of Chronicles. According to the former, Hiram was an artificer only in brass, and the pieces which he executed for the Temple were the two pillars, Jachin and Boaz, the molten sea with its twelve oxen, the ten layers with their bases, the shovels and basins, all of brass. But in the Second Book of the Chronicles he is depicted as a man of many parts, and the impression is conveyed that he superintended all the work of the Temple. Josephus seeks to reconcile the two accounts by saying that Hiram was expert in all sorts of work, but that his chief skill lay in working in gold, silver and brass.

And there our exact knowledge of Hiram ends. History knows nothing of him. The volume of the Sacred Law is silent as to his fate. Brother Robert Freke Gould, founding on the eleventh verse of the fourth chapter of the Second Book of the Chronicles, says he "was certainly alive at the completion of the Temple."

Out of this slender basis of fact Freemasonry has created a wonderfully vivid character. The Order maintains that he was the chief architect at the construction of the Temple and associates him with Hiram, King of Tyre, and Solomon, King of Israel, on a footing of Masonic equality. It suggests that these three were the most exalted personages in the Masonic world and that the secrets of a Master Mason had either descended to them, or been invented by them, and could not be communicated to anyone else without the consent of all three. There were Master Masons in abundance at the Temple, but apparently none of them had been admitted to a knowledge of the secrets and mysteries of the High and Sublime Degree. Consequently, when certain curious Fellow-Crafts sought to obtain the hidden knowledge they were compelled to

approach one or another of the three grand masters. They selected Hiram and when he refused their request they murdered him in the manner described in Masonic ritual.

"Taken literally," says Charles William Heckethorn in "The Secret Societies of all Ages and Countries," "the story of Hiram offers nothing so extraordinary as to deserve to be commemorated after three thousand years throughout the world by solemn rites and ceremonies. The death of an architect is not so important a matter to have more honour paid to it than is shewn the memory of so many philosophers and learned men who have lost their lives in the cause of human progress The legend is purely allegorical. . . . The dramatic portion of the mysteries of antiquity is always sustained by a pity or man who perishes as the victim of an evil power, and rises again into a more glorious existence. In the ancient mysteries, we constantly meet with the record of a sad event, a crime which plunges nations into strife and grief, succeeded by joy and exultation."

Leaving for the moment the question as to the meaning of the allegory and whence it was borrowed, let us consider at what date the legend of Hiram was engrafted upon Craft Masonry.

It is generally admitted by students that the elaborate ceremonial, and multiplicity of degrees which flourish to-day under the general terms of Freemasonry, are of comparatively modern growth, and that before the era of Grand Lodges not more than one, or at most, two degrees were in existence. The Freemasonry of to-day appears to owe a good deal to the enthusiasm and imagination of two brethren who were active in the first half of the eighteenth century. These were Dr. James Anderson, an Aberdonian, who was a Presbyterian minister in London, and Dr John Theophilus Desaguliers, a native of La Rochelle, an Episcopalian clergyman, who also laboured in the Metropolis. Dr George Aliver, another parson who, was keenly interested in the Craft, and contributed much to masonic literature, says that "the name of the individual who attached the aphanism of H.A.B. to Freemasonry has never been clearly ascertained; although it may be fairly presumed that Brothers Desaguliers and Anderson were prominent parties to it," adding that when "these two Brothers were publicly accused by their seceding contemporaries of manufacturing the degree " they "*never denied*" it. Brother Robert Freke Gould, noticing the statement of Oliver, says that Anderson and Desaguliers had been many years in their graves when the accusation was made, and that, consequently, their silence "is not to be wondered at." But if Gould himself does not lay the blame or credit of the Third Degree at the door of these Brethren he favours the view that Hiram became a prominent character in Masonic ritual during the years of their activity.

"When the legend of Hiram's death was first incorporated with our older traditions, it is not easy to decide," he says, "but in my judgement it must have taken place between 1723 and 1729, and,," he adds, "I should be inclined to name 1725 as the most likely year for its introduction."

Gould is led to this view from two considerations: first, the remarkable paucity of references to Hiram in the Old Charges and early catechisms of Freemasonry, and, secondly, the prominence given to him in the edition of Dr Anderson's "Constitutions," published in 1738. He thinks, wisely most people will agree, that if the murder of Hiram Abiff had been a tradition of the Craft in early days, not only would allusions to him be found in the literature of the Order, but he

would have appeared in the earlier degrees, and not been thrust without any sort of warning into the third degree, much to the surprise of all who regard Craft Masonry as a gradually developing spectacle. As Palgrave says, "It is not well for the personages of the historical drama to rise on the stage through the trap-doors. They should first appear entering in between the side scenes. Their play will be better understood then. We are puzzled when a king, or count, suddenly lands upon our historical ground, like a collier winched. up through a shaft."

It is not improbable, that just about the time mentioned by Gould - the close of the first quarter of the eighteenth century - the traditionary history was enlarged, the ceremonial rearranged, and what was formerly the second degree expanded and then divided so as to form the degrees of Fellow-Craft and Master Mason. Countenance to this view by a comparison of the first and second editions of Anderson's "Constitutions." In the earliest editions, issued in 1723, the author dwells at some length upon the magnificence of King Solomon's Temple. This is repeated in the later edition, published in 1738, but a number, of details as to the manner of its erection are given which suggests that it had grown in Masonic ceremonial importance during the intervening years. For example, Anderson states that after "the *Cape-stone* was celebrated by the *Fraternity*, their joy was soon interrupted by the sudden death of their dear master, *Hiram Abiff*, whom they decently interred in the *Lodge* near the *Temple*, according to ancient Usage.

If it be assumed that the third degree was invented about 1725, and that the invention involved the introduction of the Hiramic legend the next point for consideration is, to what source did the founders turn for material? Beyond casual references to him, the Old Charges are silent concerning Hiram, and there is nothing to indicate that he was commemorated in any way. He is simply referred to as a "Master of Geometry, " and the chief of all the various classes of workmen engaged in the building of the Temple. He appears to have been slightly more prominent in the ceremonial of the Rosicrucians with whom Freemasons are sometimes identified. Professor Buhle, in his "Historico-Critical Enquiry into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, says: - -

"The building of Solomon's Temple had an obvious meaning as a prefiguration of Christianity. Hiram, simply the architect of this temple to the real professors of the art of building, was to the English Rosicrucians a type of Christ: and the legend of Masons, which represented this Hiram as having been murdered by his fellow-workmen, made the type still more striking."

In a footnote to his Essay, Buhle explains that "Hiram " was understood by the older Freemasons as an anagram H.I.R.A.M. derived from two Latin phrases: the one, "Homo Jesus Redemptor AnimaruM," and the other, "Homo :us Rex Altissimus Mundi." By "older Freemasons," Ruble probably means Rosicrucians as phrases relating to Jesus seem singularly out of place in the plan of Craft Masonry.

If the inventors of the third degree got the suggestion from the Rosicrucians to make Hiram the central figure in their new scheme, it is very obvious that they found their details as to his murder in "The Legend of the Temple," and turned that story to suit the purpose they had in view. The Legend is given. at length in Charles William Heckethorn's singularly attractive work,

"The Secret Societies of all Ages and Countries," from which it may be summarised as follows:

" Hiram, the descendent of Tubal-Cain, who first constructed a furnace and worked in metals, erected a marvellous building, the Temple of Solomon, raised the golden throne of Solomon, and built many glorious edifices. But, melancholy amidst all his greatness, he lived alone, understood and loved by few, hated by many, including Solomon, who was envious of his genius and glory. When Balkis, the Queen of Sheba, came to Jerusalem, Solomon led her to behold the Temple, and the Queen was lost in admiration. The King, captivated by her beauty, offered his hand, which she accepted. On again visiting the Temple she repeatedly desired to see the architect. Solomon delayed as long as possible, but at last was forced to present Hiram Abiff to the Queen. When she wished to see the countless host of workmen that wrought at the Temple, Solomon protested the impossibility of assembling them all at once; but, Hiram, leaping on a stone to be better seen, with his right hand described in the air the symbolical Tau, and immediately the men hastened from all parts of the work into the presence of their master. At this the Queen wondered greatly, and secretly repented of the promise she had given the King, for she felt herself in love with the mighty architect. Solomon set himself to destroy this affection, and to prepare his rival's humiliation and ruin. For this purpose he employed three fellow-crafts, envious of Hiram, because he had refused to raise them to the degree of masters on account of their want of knowledge and their idleness. The black envy these three projected that the casting of the brazen sea, which was to raise the glory of Hiram its utmost height, should turn out a failure. The day for the casting arrived and the Queen Sheba was present. The doors that restrained the molten metal were opened, and torrents of liquid fire poured into the cast mould wherein the brazen sea was to assume its form. But the burning mass flowed like lava over the adjacent aces. The terrified crowd fled from the advancing stream of fire, while Hiram, calm, like a god, endeavoured to arrest its advance with ponderous columns of water, but without success

"The dishonoured artificer could not with draw himself from the scene of his discomforture. Suddenly he heard a strange voice coming from above and crying, 'Hiram, Hiram, Hiram;' He raised his eyes and beheld a gigantic human figure. The apparition continued, 'Come, my son, be without fear, I have rendered thee incombustible, cast thyself into the flames.' Hiram threw himself into the furnace, and where others would have found death, he tasted ineffable delights nor could he, drawn by an irresistible force, leave it, and asked him that drew him into the abyss, 'Who art thou?' 'I am the father of thy fathers,' was the answer, 'I am Tubal-Cain.'

"Tubal-Cain introduced Hiram into the sanctuary of fire, and into the presence of Cain, to author of his race. When Hiram was about to be restored to earth, Tubal-Cain gave him the hammer with which he himself had wrought great things, and said to him, 'Thanks to this hammer and the help of the geni of fire, thou shalt speedily accomplish the work left unfinished through man's stupidity and malignity.' Hiram did not hesitate to test the wonderful efficacy of the precious instrument, and the dawn saw the great mass of bronze cast. The artist felt the most lively joy. The Queen exulted.

"One day after this the Queen accompanied by her maids, went beyond Jerusalem, and there encountered Hiram, alone and thoughtful. . They mutually confessed their love. Solomon now

hinted to the fellow-crafts that the removal of his rival, who refused to give them the master's word, would be acceptable unto himself; so when the architect came into the temple he was assailed and slain by them. They wrapped up his body, carried it to a solitary hill and buried it, planting over the grave a sprig of acacia.

"Hiram, not having made his appearance for seven days, Solomon, to satisfy the clamour of the people, was forced to have him searched for. The body was found by three masters, and they, suspecting that he had been slain by the three fellow-crafts for refusing them the master's word, determined nevertheless for greater security to change the word. The three fellow-crafts were traced, but rather than fall into the hands of their pursuers, they committed suicide, and their heads were brought to Solomon."

Based as it obviously was on this legend of the Temple, the question still remains, why was the story of the death of Hiram engrafted with so much detail upon Freemasonry? The postulant is taught that the peculiar object of the Third Degree is to teach the heart to seek for happiness in the consciousness of a life well-spent, and invited to reflect upon death and to realise that to the just and virtuous man death has no terrors equal to the stain of falsehood and dishonour. All excellent moral teaching, but not illustrated in any way by the career of Hiram Abiff concerning whose life and conduct we know absolutely nothing. And it seems that we must look for an explanation in some other direction.

Many writers - chiefly non-Masons - have sought to throw light upon the subject, and with one voice they agree that the story of the death of Hiram is simply the Masonic way of serving up an ancient mystery. Mr John Fellows, who brings a mass of knowledge to a study of the subject, says that "the story of Hiram is only another version, like those of Adonis and Astarte, and of Ceres and Prosperine, of the fable of Osiris and Isis. The likeness throughout," he adds, "is so exact as not to admit of doubt. The search for the body of Hiram; the enquiries made of a wayfaring man, and the intelligence received; the sitting down of one of the party to rest and refresh himself, and the hint conveyed by the *sprig* over the grave; the body of Hiram remaining *fourteen days* in the grave prepared by the assassins before it was discovered, all have allusion to, and comport with, the allegory of Osiris and Isis. The condition even in which the grave of Hiram is found, covered with green *moss* and turf, corresponds very much with that in which Isis found the coffin of Osiris."

Assuming that Mr Fellows and those who agree with him are correct what is the reason why the inventors of the Third Degree in the first quarter of the eighteenth century gave a Biblical turn to an old-world fable and introduced it into Freemasonry to teach the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead? The question is not easy to answer, and at most one can but hazard a guess.

May it not be that those who were anxious to build up the degree found their starting point in the anagram familiar to the Rosicrucians which, by a very striking coincidence, agreed with the name of the principal architect of the Temple? Thus directed to Hiram they, decided to turn that craftsman to account and found much material ready to their hands in the Legend of the Temple. But the love story of the Queen of Sheba and the jealousy of Solomon were of no dramatic value to them in developing the degree, and consequently they had to adapt the story to their

particular needs. What the ultimate origin of Freemasonry was may never be discovered, but much of the elaborate ceremonial has a close affinity to early sun-worship and where, therefore, would the Authors more readily turn than to one of the solar myths. In the legend of Osiris they found something that fitted in exactly with their scheme, and just as the H.I.R.A.M. of the Rosicrucians referred to that Son of God who is the Light of the World, so their Hiram was made to represent Osiris, or the sun, the glorious luminary of the day. The three fellow-crafts, as the ceremonial of the degree takes form, are stationed at the west, south and east entrances, and these are regions illuminated by the Sun. Twelve persons play an important part in the tragedy; the number, no doubt, alludes to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, and it has been suggested that the three assassins symbolise the three inferior signs of winter, Libra, Scorpio, and Sagittarius. The Sun descends in the west, and it is at the west door that Hiram is slain. The acacia which typifies the new vegetation that will come as "a result of the Sun's resurrection, and is found in many ancient solar allegories, and is therefore quite naturally introduced into the Masonic story. According to one statement, Hiram's body is found in a state of decay, having lain fourteen days; the body of Osiris was cut into fourteen pieces. Another statement insists that the body was found on the seventh day, and this again may allude to the resurrection of the Sun, "which actually takes place in the seventh month after his passage through the inferior signs, that passage which is called his descent into hell." Other details in the Masonic tragedy are related to the solar myth. It is through the instrumentality of Leo - the Lion - that Osiris is raised, for when he re-enters that sign, he regains his former strength. Hiram was raised by the Lion's grip, and it is by that grip that the Freemason is raised from a figurative death to a reunion with the companions of his former toil. The parallel is wonderfully complete.

An early catechism of the Craft says that Masonry is "a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols." To-day it is something more. The first degree accords with the definition; but the second degree is largely concerned with the erection of a Temple to the Lord, and, the Third Degree points the Craftsman to the Grand Lodge above to which he may hope to ascend after he has passed through the valley of the shadow of death. All this is religion - not morals; and it is as part of our common faith in immortality that Hiram's death is used as an illustration in the high and sublime degree. Just as, in early pagan belief, the Sun was supposed to lose his strength in the dark days of winter, and rise again to glory in the height of summertime; and just as, in the ceremonial of the Rosicrucians, the Son of Man, who was slain had a glorious resurrection to eternal life, so, throughout all the world, wherever Craft Masonry is practised, the postulant typifies our Master Hiram, not alone to show that death is preferable to dishonour, but to impress upon the Fraternity that the just and virtuous man may hope to be received as a worthy brother into the Grand Lodge above, where the world's Great Architect rules and reigns forever.