

When you read a ritual, you can often determine how it was created. Some rituals clearly come from a single person's ideas; some appear created by committee; some show the impression of many years' development; and a few reflect inspiration from a higher source. The degree of Most Excellent Master is one of the latter. Traditional history tells us that it was penned by Thomas Smith Webb and mention is made of it in Middletown, Connecticut in 1783. However, there were a number of degrees with similar names being conferred in the United Kingdom, including a Most Excellent Master degree in Scotland, which F. G Spiedel claims to be the basis of Webb's degree in his book 'A History and Handbook, the York Rite of Freemasonry'.

The Degree is based on the completion of King Solomon's Temple, and reflects a strong familiarity with biblical teachings and especially the Psalms. This is not surprising from an age where the first book any family would possess would be a bible, which would not sit in a bookshelf but would be studied by the family every day. What is surprising is how the degree seeks to draw a parallel between God's creation of the world and his creation of Man, and Man's creation of the Temple, which is often said to be a microcosmic representation of creation.

For Masons, the analogy may be even deeper.

Kabbalistic tradition informs us that God created man first, before the rest of creation, and He did this to know what he looked like. In a way the first man, Adam Kadmon, was a reflection of God. In a similar manner our tradition tells us that the physical Temple of Solomon was – and is – a representation of man, with its outer courts containing representations of parts of the physical body, while in the center, the Holy of Holies represented the spiritual core of man, where God dwelled. Was the Temple also seen as a living entity? Whether the original celebrations at the dedication of the Temple at Jerusalem reflected this we will probably never know. However, the Masonic ceremony we have before us clearly points in this direction.

Perambulations – or circumambulations – in the form of a circle have long been believed to raise energy, most commonly at the center of the circle being described. You only have to watch a Disney cartoon of a magician to see the magician drawing three quick circles with his wand before thrusting it forward and see the magic 'bolt' shoot out of the end of the rod! In a similar vein, recreating past events linked them to the present – a technique seen in just about every culture in the world, where the storyteller has the power to cross time by evoking images and tales of former times.

With this in mind, let us examine the first part of the Most Excellent Master Degree.

In six days God created the heavens and the earth. This is the 6th Degree in the York Rite system. If the Degree refers to Adam Kadmon, or the perfect man before his fall, then we would expect to find evidence of this in Hebrew teaching. The tradition of Kabbalah is based on the Tree of Life, which is composed of ten Sephiroth, or emanations from God. The 6th emanation is Tiphareth, which is the direct reflection of God. It is referred to the Sun, and also to perfect balance; and in Christian mysticism to Christ. As Adam Kadmon, it is the reflection of the Spiritual Temple in its primitive glory and perfection.

God created the world in six days. It is interesting to note that, in the first part of our ritual we circumambulate the Lodge six times, and each time we pass the East we give a sign to indicate we are now at a higher grade - or level – than before. We move from East to West, following the ‘morning and evening of the first’ and subsequent days. Finally, after the sixth circumambulation we remove our aprons. We rest.

So we have just reenacted the creation of the world. In a way it is a kind of *Mystery Play*, in which we play the creating forces. Can we find any analogy between what is described in Genesis and the grades or levels we have just passed through? I will make a suggestion. You will find the discussion point of this paper will focus on this point.

- On the 1st Day God created light. We bring the Light of wisdom to the Apprentice. Light is traditionally provided by candles, representing Fire.
- On the 2nd Day the waters above were divided from the waters below. We teach the lesson of duality to the Fellowcraft, in the two pillars of the Temple. The element referred is Water.
- On the 3rd Day dry land and vegetation appears. It is noteworthy that the Third Degree has as two of its most potent symbols the images of soil, burial and the acacia. Here we are immersed in Earth.
- On the 4th Day the sun, moon and stars are created to govern the day and night, which divide and mark the divisions of time. Air is the focus of these actions.
- On the 5th Day sea creatures, animals and birds appear. This will be the homework!
- On the 6th Day God creates man, or places him on earth (many traditions have God creating man first, then placing in the place He has made for him considerably later). This introduces the Soul, or Spirit into the Elements of Fire, Water, Earth and Air noted above, and vivifies them.

Purification by the Elements is a requirement of many religions and rituals, in order to render it worthy to receive the spirit. Anyone who has seen the Entered Apprentice Degree worked by Garibaldi Lodge will know this!¹

As the Candidate is brought in Psalm 24 is recited. According to the USCCB² “the psalm apparently accompanied a ceremony of the entry of God (invisibly enthroned upon the ark), followed by the people, into the temple. The temple commemorated the creation of the world.” The Candidate participates in this activity of invoking life and power into the ceremony. He functions on two levels: in one he represents the living temple; and in the other he represents the ‘spirit’ which is about to bring the temple to life. He is prepared for this symbolic role through the Obligation.

At the Obligation, the Brothers are instructed to stand around the candidate and altar in the form of a circle. The Candidate is made to be the ‘point within a circle’, which itself is often considered to be the perfect shape, even a representation of God. The ritual of Emulation includes the beautiful words: “and the circle is the emblem of the creative mind by which the

¹ A Lodge under the New York jurisdiction which practices a unique First Degree, in which candidates undergo trials by each of the ancient elements.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

perfect circle is made manifest.” In the Obligation the Candidate swears to dispense (Masonic) light, and as the point within the circle in his state of perfection, Adam Kadmon is the prism of God’s light. There is another odd phrase in the Obligation, too, where the Candidate promises not to “derogate from the character I am about to assume...” The words ‘about to assume’ tell us that the Candidate is indeed about to become something different. The word ‘derogate’ means to stray, or prevaricate; and we all know that, just as Adam broke his vow not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis, so the next Degree in the York Rite will show us the Temple broken and destroyed, because the people of Israel, who represent the body of Adam Kadmon, broke their vow to God.

But at this moment all is perfect; the Temple is completed; and man before the Fall is the true reflection of God.

So the Degree of Most Excellent Master is both a reflection of the story of creation in Genesis, while giving a more direct focus on the creation and duties of man; and also a shining example of the sublime heights to which ritual can rise when it is truly inspired.

In the next paper we will consider the symbolism of the Second Part of the ritual. In the meantime, here are a couple of questions for your consideration and discussion:

1. If the 5th Degree equates to the fifth circumambulation and the Virtual Past Master Degree, can you think of any links between this Degree and the 5th day of creation? Is there an element associated with this Degree? If you remember earlier versions of the Virtual Past Master Degree, which involves the removal of the warrant from the Lodge and the pandemonium which ensues, or the Allegory of Levi being installation in the Oriental Chair by King Solomon, this would provide further areas for consideration.
2. Revisit the penalty of the degree. What do you think it represents? As a suggestion, a penalty is often the converse of a positive action. For example, is the penalty of the First Degree a perverse alternative to being knighted for demonstrating good and loyal service? Think about the actions involved. Now, remembering from what man is created in Genesis, and how Eve was created, could the penalty be a perversion of this action – an appropriate punishment for someone who violates their sacred trust? Some traditions actually teach that man was originally a purely spiritual being, but believing himself equal to God, attempted an act of creation himself: but instead of creating a spiritual being, he only managed to mire himself in mud – which represents our physical body – and which we need to learn to shed in order to regain our original state as spiritual entities.