

My Brethren, I would like to take the next few minutes to explore the subject of Symbolism. Although we all know that symbolism can be said to be synonymous with terms such as representation, allegorical, emblematic etc etc, I would like to explore symbolism from the perspective of “interpretation” thus allowing both Yourself and Myself the latitude to be Objective as well as Subjective. In this presentation, we will explore two things which are ‘front and centre’ in every Lodge; one being the Master Masons Apron, the other being the VSL.

The Master Masons Apron.

The blue fringe, which surrounds the white leather center, is a constant reminder of the universality of Freemasonry. Its unbroken nature reminds us of the unbroken bond of friendship and Brotherly Love which exists among members of the Fraternity. Some believe that the color of light blue was used to denote the canopy of heaven but the color also denotes universal friendship.

In ancient times, it was believed that everything in the universe was composed of combinations of four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water. It is interesting to note that the traditional symbols of these four elements are contained on the Master Masons apron: earth is represented by the rectangular base of the apron, air is represented by the color of light blue contained in the trim, fire is represented by a triangle with the apex pointed up as represented by the formation that the rosettes are in, and water is represented by a triangle with its apex pointed down in the same manner as the apron's flap. This is a further reminder of the universal nature of Freemasonry.

The rectangular shape of the apron also teaches us certain lessons. The four right angles teach purity, truth, sincerity and honesty, which are the generally accepted foundations of morality. The four sides of the rectangle represent the four cardinal virtues of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice.

The triangular nature of the flap is interesting for several reasons. First the triangle is the ancient symbol of the Deity. The apex pointed downward can be taken to denote the watchfulness of the Deity and the descent of benevolence and knowledge to created matter, or man. It is also a reminder of the generally accepted threefold nature of the Deity:

Egyptians- Horus, Isis, Osiris

Hindus - Brahma, Vishnu, Siva

Hebrews - Elohim, Elshaddai, Jehovah

Christians - Father, Son , Holy Spirit

The two vertical ribbons on the apron are generally thought of as remnants of the Operative apron, which was at times worn with the chest flap down and tied at the waist in the front. When worn like this the frayed ends of the tied strings would dangle down much like our ornamental ribbons today. However there are other things these two ribbons can remind us of. First are the two pillars that were on the front porch of King Solomon's Temple, Boaz and Jachin. Of course that calls all of their symbolism to mind. We can also be reminded of the two parallel lines of the first degree which represented Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist and then remember that their teachings are meant to be guidelines for our own behaviour.

The seven tassels suspended from each ribbon are generally thought to remind us of the seven liberal arts and sciences. They can also remind us of the four sides of the rectangular apron and the three sides of the triangular flap, the first representing the material nature of the universe, the second the spiritual nature and therefore once again we have a reminder of universality. They also can be taken to represent the seven primary colors which when united result in white light, which is always the symbol of perfect knowledge.

The three rosettes on the apron, in addition to the thoughts expressed earlier, can remind us of all the threes we have been exposed to in Freemasonry:

- *Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth*
- *Square, level and plumb*
- *Morality, equality and rectitude of life*
- *Wisdom, strength and beauty - Doric, Ionic and Corinthian*
- *Three Grand Masters at the Temple - Three Master Masons to form a Lodge*
- *Three Great Lights*
- *Three lesser lights*
- *Three degrees*

The five exposed angles of the apron when worn are emblematical of the five points of fellowship (two right angles and the three angles of the triangle).

The three angles of the triangle, the five exposed angles of the worn apron, and the sum of the four sides of the rectangle and the three sides of the triangle being seven gives us a reference to the three, five and seven steps of the flight of winding stairs to the middle chamber. This of course brings to mind our three Grand Masters, the three Degrees, the five Noble Orders of Architecture, the five senses of human nature and the seven liberal arts and sciences.

The belt or tie strings are generally recognized as a reminder of "the length of our cabletow". When attached the belt forms a complete circle around the body and this can remind us of the eternal nature of God, no beginning and never ending.

The three primary shapes contained within the apron, the circle, triangle and the rectangle, are emblematical of the spirit, the three fold revelation of God and the material universe or man (for in the creation of man all the elements of the universe were united). Therefore our apron represents the totality of nature, as we know it.

It is unclear whether our Brethren designed our apron in 1813 with all of this in mind or if it was just fortunate that the parts fit so many lessons. What is important to us is that we never wear our apron as a mere piece of clothing but remember instead that it is a teaching tool and a reminder of the lessons we have learned during our progress in Freemasonry.

Finally, may you ever wear this apron with pride, and rest assured: if you never disgrace this apron, it will never disgrace you.

The Volume of the Sacred Law.

Notably an all time best seller, with all the components one would expect to see from A to Z from Abel to Zeredatha, from murder to mystery to intrigue and even romance. Interestingly, few Masons know where the VSL is opened to in the first Degree, and even fewer know why and how that specific passage relates to us as Masons. As we are not Operative, but Speculative Masons Please allow me some creative license to 'speculate'.

Ruth 4:7 (21st Century King James Version)

“Now this was the manner in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging, to confirm all things: a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor; and this was a testimony in Israel”.

People often ask what this “testimony” all about and why is the Book opened to this particular passage. There are many teachings in the Book of Ruth for the EA, which we can discuss at a later time. For now, I would like to concentrate on the meaning of being shoeless. To understand the true meaning of the act we need to refer to another passage in the V.S.L:

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 (21st Century King James Version)

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry outside unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him for a wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her.

And it shall be that the firstborn whom she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother who is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

And if the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, 'My husband's brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel. He will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.'

Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak unto him; and if he stand by it and say, 'I like not to take her,' then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house.'

And his name shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him that hath his shoe loosed.'

To sum it up Deuteronomy 25:5-10: In the old Israelite tradition if your brother should die childless it was your brotherly responsibility to father a child (with his widow) thus bearing and continuing his name. Failing to do so was considered a great shame or dishonor, and resulted in being branded forever, as belonging to the “shoeless man’s house”.

Now that we have explored the meaning of being shoeless, let's connect the dots by exploring the ‘who’s who’ and how they were related. A lady named Naomi (who was a widow) had two Sons named Mahlon and Chilion. One was married to Ruth and the other to Orpah, and they all lived in Moab. We are told that both Sons died unexpectedly and relatively early in life and childless. Without husbands / income, their future was bleak, consequently Naomi decided to return to her hometown of Judah and informed Ruth and Orpah that they could return to their respective families. Orpah elected to do so, but Ruth chose to remain with Naomi and so the two of them returned to Judah. They struggled to feed themselves and survived by “gleaning” which can be described as follows: When farmers harvested their crops, they did not harvest the borders of the fields, instead that aspect of the crop was left behind for the poorer people to collect for themselves. An early form of Tithing perhaps?

Each day, Naomi and Ruth would visit a particular farm, which we learn was owned by a relative of her former husband, to glean food. Now for the ‘romance’; it appears the Land Owner noticed Ruth and became attracted to her so much so that he told his workers to make sure that there was always sufficient left behind for these ladies. He also observed her loyalty to have remained with her Mother in law to support her. Finally the Land Owner decided to act upon his desires, but being an honorable man, he respected the custom that another man had the ‘first right’ to marry Ruth. This Land Owner was none other than Boaz, the Great Grand Father of David who of course was the Father of King Solomon. Boaz made his move by first approaching the other man, as we learn in :

Ruth 4:1 (21st Century King James Version)

*Then went Boaz up to the gate and sat himself down there; and behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spoke came by, unto whom he said, "Ho, **such a one!** Turn aside, sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down.*

The V.S.L. refers to this person as “such a one!” The original Hebrew text names him “Pelsoni Almoni” which loosely translates to “John Doe” or “Mr. So and So”.

As speculative masons this reminds us that when we move to the Grand Lodge above all that remains in this world are the echoes of our actions. The lesson of the importance to take action is one of the first lessons taught to the E.A.:

"for the heart may conceive, and the head devise in vein, if the hand be not prompt to execute the design."

As his actions determined, the man who took his shoe off will always be remembered as “Mr. So and So”.

My fellow speculative masons, each and every one of us needs to ask himself every day: “Am I a Boaz today? Or am I Mr. So and So”?

Writer’s Notes:

1. Orpah means “Back of the neck”
2. Boaz means “Strength”
3. Solomon means “Wisdom”
4. Ruth 1 viii. Naomi’s home was in the town of Bethlehem in the country of Judah.
5. Ruth 2 iv. “Jehovah be with you” spoken by farm workers to Boaz (signifying Faith)
6. Ruth 2 xii. “Jehovah recompense loyalty to Naomi (signifying Hope)
7. Ruth 2 xv. Allowing Ruth to glean
8. Ruth 3 xvii. “There is one who has more right than me” (Boaz recognizing Mr No Name)
9. Ruth 4 vi. “I cannot redeem lest I mar my inheritance. Redeem thou for yourself what is mine to redeem”. (Mr No Name to Boaz Mr. No Name did not want to give up his inheritance by marrying Ruth. Clearly an example of deviation from moral responsibility “above the external advantages of rank and fortune”)!