

The Three Grand Masters and the Traditional Observance Lodge

Our Masonic tradition tells us that our Craft had three original Grand Masters. Solomon King of Israel, Hiram King of Tyre, and Hiram Abif.

The first of these, Solomon, King of Israel, figures prominently in our Masonic story as the driving force behind the construction of the temple at Jerusalem. He is still known as a great personage thirty centuries after his time.

Hiram of Tyre was a monarch who ruled over a powerful kingdom at the peak of its greatness. He has only a passing reference in our Ritual and outside of a Masonic Lodge is known only to a few specialists in history.

Hiram Abif, the third of this trio, was neither royalty, nor widely known in an historical sense. His claim to fame was his skill. He is the center and source of our deepest teaching and to him all Masons are bound by a unique tie.

In addition to their place in history, each is associated with a particular attribute.

Solomon is associated with Wisdom, Hiram king of Tyre with Strength, and Hiram Abif with Beauty. These associations are presented to the new mason by the Junior Warden and are reflective of their worldly accomplishments. They make perfect sense, and should you be content to accept them at face value and examine them no further, would suffice.

It is my opinion, however, that beyond the obvious and stated associations there are others which are less obvious.

Let us first look at the wisdom of Solomon.

The most famously quoted illustration of the wisdom of Solomon was his decision regarding the two women who both claimed a child was their own. His solution to have the child cut in half and give both women half of the child ingeniously revealed the true parent.

King Solomon was the first king to assume the throne of Israel from his father. David, as a result of his military conquests and expansion of the kingdom passed on to his son a fairly impressive fortune, as well as a proven and battle tested army consisting not only of foot soldiers, but cavalry and chariots, and an experienced group of leaders who were familiar with their use.

As soon as Solomon assumed the throne he began to consolidate his position through appointments of trusted individuals to key military, government and religious posts. He also strengthened his position through marital alliances. It is recorded that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and although there is undoubtedly some measure of exaggeration to those figures, they do indicate his position as a great monarch. Marriage was at that time a form of diplomacy. Solomon wed the daughters and sisters of kings from far and wide, cementing alliances of arms and trade to further his establishment of a commercial empire.

Having established such a commercial venture, Solomon was to embark on a vigorous building program to supply the fortresses and garrison cities throughout his empire. Almost every corner of the kingdom was included, since the success of the commercial ventures made such a program possible. By far the most lavish improvements were made in the capitol city, Jerusalem, where he erected a wall, a palace, and the temple. Surrounding the city, but not in the holy city itself, there were facilities and shrines for the groups of foreigners who traveled to Israel on trade missions which produced the funds for the building program.

In this sense the wisdom of Solomon can therefore be summed up as taking a good thing and making it better.

Further to the north, Hiram of the Kingdom of Tyre, or Phoenicia, as it was more generally known, was located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, north of Palestine. Its principal city was the seaport of Tyre, which because of its geographical location became a converging point on the great trade routes. Tyre became one of the foremost commercial centers of the ancient world and grew rich and powerful.

Phoenicia has two just claims to high achievement.

In the first place, the Phoenicians were among the first known sailors of the world. It is said that they were the first to navigate upon the open sea and to chart their course by means of the stars. Thus to the men of Tyre goes the distinction of being the fathers of modern navigation. They must indeed have been an alert and venturesome race. It is known that Phoenician sailors traveled all over the Mediterranean - sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar, down the coast of Africa, up the coast of Spain and even as far as England. If we wish to romanticize history a little we can see in our mind's eye a sea captain of Hiram of Tyre sailing through the Pillars of Hercules

and gazing out upon a vast ocean - not knowing that 3000 miles beyond his sight lay a land where 3000 years later the name of his royal master would be perpetuated in Masonic Lodges.

As the Phoenicians went about the Mediterranean they founded colonies in various places, the most famous of which was Carthage on the northern coast of Africa. Carthage flourished, and as the parent Tyre began to decline, Carthage carried on the Phoenician tradition. It came into conflict with the rising power of Rome, and after years of furious struggles known as the Punic Wars, Rome was triumphant and Carthage was destroyed. But Carthage almost prevailed - her general, Hannibal, one of the greatest military commanders of all time, took an army across northern Africa, through Spain and southern France, over the Alps and down to the very gates of Rome before he was stopped. It is very interesting to speculate that if Carthage had conquered Rome, our civilization, which so largely bears the imprint of the Romans, might instead have been influenced by the people of Hiram of Tyre.

In the second place, the Phoenicians may claim to a high place in the history of mankind because they were the inventors of one of the first known alphabets. We take the alphabet so much for granted that it is hard for us to conceive of the time when it did not exist. Hiram's people were certainly possessed of intellectual curiosity and skill to formulate a way whereby the thoughts of men could be transmitted through other than oral means. The Phoenician alphabet influenced the Greek, and the Greek the Roman.

Hiram of Tyre had been on the throne at the same time as both David and Solomon, and readily offered his assistance when Solomon made ready to fulfill the promise to his father and build the temple at Jerusalem.

Coincidentally, the arrangement benefited both Solomon and Hiram. Two commercial powers, one on land and the other at sea, united for the construction of a specific structure, would of course generate other cooperative ventures of mutual benefit.

In this sense the strength of Hiram of Tyre can be summed up as setting a high mark to aim for and swaying an entire people that it is the best and only course of action.

Hiram Abiff, associated with beauty for his decoration of the temple, is a somewhat more obscure character in that there is little to support his existence save for a few lines in several religious texts.

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 request 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 cordially, 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 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.

From the description of Hiram's qualifications we can see that he was certainly not one to let the grass grow under his feet. It is difficult for those of us today to relate to his accomplishments. To be skilled in working in brass was something that many workers spent an entire lifetime attaining. Add to that iron working, silver and goldsmithing, engraving, and working in stone, linen and dyes – all at a level that were worthy of a royal appointment and the obvious favor of the king, and you have Hiram Abif, master craftsman to the Kings of Tyre and Israel. While the beautifying effects of his handiwork undoubtedly decorated the temple and palace, he should more be associated with studious and directed effort in mastering those arts which were within his sphere of attaining.

What does this all have to do with the Traditional Observance lodge? The obvious answer is the same as it has to do with all other lodges.

I need not tell you that the very notion of a Traditional Observance lodge is something that causes the vast majority of masons either a great deal of concern, or not concern at all.

Those who it causes no concern hold the firm belief that;
it's a fad that will pass
no one will go; we can't get members out to "regular" meetings
there's nothing in the constitution to allow that kind of thing
For the former group, the concerns seem to be;
it's an encroachment on the landmarks- can't have that
it will take away members from the "regular" lodges
we should be making it easier, not harder to become a mason
and finally – where would we be without it – it's a conspiracy by
the masonic elite to take over the (here you can put in your own
favorite – lodge/district/grand lodge/county/world/universe.

I must admit that when I first heard of the idea of forming a
Traditional Observance lodge, my first impression fell into both of the
groups. Fortunately, over the course of time I have come to rely on
"gut instinct" only in my own area of expertise. In all other matters, I
must admit that I really don't know enough to venture an informed
opinion. So I set out to do a little research on my own.

To start, was it a passing fad? Perhaps in North America that is
used to the fast food concept the idea that something should take
time and effort to ensure quality is a fad. In many other countries the
emphasis on preparation and study is the only option.

No one will go and it will just fade away. I can see that. After all,
some night we can barely get enough officers out to fill the chairs.
With a membership roll of 150, 10% attendance is about average. Not
too long ago I was listening to a podcast featuring W. Bro. Tabbert,
who we had the pleasure of having as our guest speaker at the last
meeting, and W. Bro. Cliff Porter. They spoke on the topic of
Traditional Observance lodges in the US.

Some of their statements certainly caught my attention. Fully
one half of the petitions for new lodges were for Traditional
Observance lodges. Of those in existence, the average attendance
was 130%. That doesn't sound like something that's going to fade
away.

The constitution and landmark issues are one and the same,
and the answer to both is that the Traditional Observance lodges are
all warranted by and must conform to the same constitution as all
other lodges in the jurisdiction.

They will take away members from the regular lodges. Now that
would come as a shock to a lot of members. Initiating, passing and
raising a candidate does not grant a lodge a permanent ownership of

that mason. Over the course of the past six months there have been some suggestions presented on how to make meetings more meaningful and interesting. Yet still it comes as a shock to some that there are members in their own lodge who are looking for something more than “open read summons welcome visitors correspondence accounts sick and distress petitions balloting degree work election good of masonry close coffee and donuts home by 9” masonry.

The Masonic Restoration Foundation defines the Traditional Observance lodge as consisting of best practice guidelines in areas of philosophical discipline and successful management. It is a response to some of the negative trends experienced in recent years , aimed at reversing those trends and restoring the strength and dignity of the craft.

The elitist explanation for the existence and proliferation of Traditional Observance lodges is directly related to the simple fact that there are members in lodges across the land who want more out of masonry. What is elitist about Traditional Observance lodges? Is membership restricted? No. The manner of dress? No more or less so than the lodge in Texas whose stated dress is denim jeans, plaid shirts and stetsons.

The requirement that candidates for advancement not only memorize the required work for the degree, but actually prepare, present a paper in lodge and be prepared to answer questions about a topic related to the degree? Highly unlikely.

Perhaps the personifications of the pillars which support our order would be a more useful measure of the utility of the Traditional Observance lodge.

First, the wisdom of Solomon, which as I have previously indicated, can be interpreted as taking a good thing and making it better. I have no doubt that for those who wish to do so, enriching the masonic experience would certainly meet with that monarch's approval.

Hiram of Tyre, whose strength lies not only in material goods but the concept that lofty goals not only exist, but are within our grasp if we have the resolve to pursue them. Clearly that monarch would approve as well.

Hiram Abif, whose beautifying hand resulted from the lifetime of dedication to mastering a skill, finding another one, and repeating the process. Learning, and putting that knowledge into action clearly would meet with his approval as well.

The Traditional Observance lodges uphold to the highest degree the attributes of the three Grandmaster's, not only as they have traditionally been expressed, but even should they be examined at a deeper level.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address you this evening. I must admit that to research a topic such as this is one in preparation for this evening is not something I have done on a regular basis of late, but one which, as a consequence of this experience I will be engaging in more frequently in the future.