

The Obligation Of An Entered Apprentice Mason

By W. Bro. Robert V Lund

November 2013

Introduction

This short presentation on the Obligation of an Entered Apprentice Mason will deal, in some measure, with the Obligation itself. However, the Entered Apprentice needs to understand the context of this Obligation. To that purpose, I will deal with the steps leading up to the Obligation, the actions and items involved in the Obligation, the Obligation itself, and its meaning in light of the aforementioned.

Context of the Entered apprentice Degree

The First Degree is made up of fourteen distinct acts, in two series of seven each: the first seven are in a State of Darkness; the second seven in a State of Light; corresponding to the Ancient Mysteries. The Obligation comes in as the last act in darkness.

The real intention of Freemasonry, like any true spiritual path, is meant to direct a person to find the answers to the larger questions and motives: “Why am I here?”; “Where do I come from?”; “What is my purpose here?”; “Where do I ultimately go?”

I have come to understand that there are three aspects to our ritual: physical, mental, and spiritual. The first degree is mostly related to the physical; the second degree to the mental (or intellectual), and the third to the spiritual. However, each one of the degree rituals has, within it, those same three levels. The **physical** relates to the actions and movement and includes, believe it or not, lessons in Geometry and Astronomy. The **mental** relates to the moral and intellectual aspects, and the **spiritual** is the hidden aim of the ritual.

Before I go on, I must put forward some arguments that provide evidence to convince you that there *is* a deeper, hidden meaning. Our ritual tells us that there is. At your initiation, you were announced at the door of the lodge as “a poor candidate, in a state of darkness, humbly soliciting to be admitted to the *mysteries* and privileges of Ancient Freemasonry”. The words ‘ancient’ and ‘mysteries’ are giving us a clue.

During the examination before passing to the second degree, you were asked: “What is Freemasonry?”. The answer being: “A beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols”. Brethren, in this statement are more clues that there *is* something that is hidden. Let’s examine this in more detail.

“**Veiled** in allegory and illustrated by symbols...” – “**veiled**” means “hidden or covered”, and here is the first clue that there is something hidden; “**allegory**” means “a story that has a *deeper* or more general meaning *in addition to its surface meaning*”, and this is another clue; a **symbol** is “something used for, or regarded as, *representing something else*”, which is another clue. As you can see, this statement of the definition of Masonry definitely refers to something hidden.

What is it that is veiled? The Junior Warden's Tracing Board lecture begins “The usages and customs of Masonry have ever *corresponded* with those of the *Egyptian Philosophers*, to which they bear a *near affinity*. The *Pythagorean System* seems to have been established on a *similar plan*”. Here is another statement that hints that there is something hidden *and* that our ritual incorporates *ancient mysteries*.

This points to the *real* secret of Masonry: that our ritual hides deeper, more esoteric, *spiritual* lessons, based on various *ancient mysteries and teachings* that have been taught throughout the ages, in different forms.

The Approach to the Altar

The Junior Deacon tells you: “The way to approach the altar in this degree is by three steps, the first of fifteen inches, the second of twelve, the third of nine.”

First question: why three steps?

Three is the dominant number in this degree. Read the ritual and see for yourself. Some examples are: three questions; three knocks; three positions of the sun (rising, meridian, setting); three working tools; three grand offerings; three pillars (wisdom, strength, beauty, and the three orders of architecture); three great lights; three lesser lights; three items of furniture (volume of the sacred law, square, compasses); three movable jewels; three immovable jewels.

One could think of three as being used to achieve balance: two extremes and a point in the middle. I put it this way in an article on the Pythagorean number system: The establishment of a relationship between two opposing forces becomes a third force, to provide balance.

Second question: why fifteen, twelve, and nine inches?

These are the lengths of the three sides of a Pythagorean triangle, used to construct a right-angle. This is defined in the 47th problem of Euclid, and an important discovery by the learned Pythagoras.

So, from a mason's point of view, this could be used to create a square. Obviously that's of great use in building and construction, but as we are not operative but Free and Accepted masons, we make use of it for more noble purposes.

As Masons, we understand the moral lessons derived from the square. These are taught in the ritual and lectures of the Entered Apprentice Degree.

In addition, the triangle is an ancient symbol, and its many forms have various meanings.

History records that Pythagoras established a society with philosophical aims. There were many teachings around Sacred Geometry, which was used to try and understand

the Universe. Shrouded in secrecy, they believed that only by truly understanding the universe could one achieve salvation of the soul, and as Divinity created all things, studying it over a period of several lifetimes, could bring one closer to Divinity itself.

From a spiritual point of view, we should understand the base of the triangle to represent the physical aspect of ourselves. The vertical line represents the mental or intellectual aspect, and the hypotenuse or diagonal represents the spiritual side.

It should be noted that the steps are towards the East, which is defined in the mysteries as the source of light.

Examining the Altar

The Obligation is taken at the Altar and on the Three Great Lights of Freemasonry (the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and Compasses).

The Altar holds the Volume of the Sacred Law, and is therefore considered to be a sacred place. This applies to the Altar itself as well as the area immediately surrounding it.

The Volume of the Sacred Law is typically a sacred text such as the Old Testament, the Koran, or some other book meaningful to the Candidate. But it has a deeper significance. It is the *visible* emblem of the invisible *Cosmic Law*, through which the Creator is manifested in the Universe. It represents the Creator, whose “law” is the basis for everything in existence, as taught in the ancient mysteries.

Resting on the Volume of the Sacred Law are the Square and Compasses. In addition to the meaning given to these by the Worshipful Master: of keeping in due bounds with all of mankind, and acting on the square (meaning being honest in all your actions), there are deeper meanings.

The **Compasses** represent the *Cosmic (or Divine) Principle* and our link to the manifestations of the Creator. Further meaning will be found in the Master Mason Degree.

The **Square**, although opposite to, and inextricably conjoined with, the Compasses, represents cosmic *matter*, in which the Divine Principle takes form.

The points of the Compasses, being concealed beneath the Square, in this degree, imply that the candidate's *spirit* is, at that time, *overlain*, and prevented from full function by the tendencies of his *material* body. If man is to become perfected and rise to the full possibilities of his being, his spiritual principle must not remain subordinate to the flesh and its tendencies, but gain ascendancy over them.

To summarize: Three Great Lights represent Cosmic Law, the Cosmic or Divine Principle, and Cosmic Matter. In conjunction, the Three Great Lights reveal the *Cosmic Purpose*: of Spirit and Matter working in unison, and according to Cosmic Law, to construct a perfect Universe, occupied by beings seeking perfection, as described in the Ancient Mysteries. Explaining this further at this point is not possible due to time

constraints, but it is important and further study is required in order to understand fully what this represents.

The position of the Altar in the Lodge (the centre) is a symbol of what Masonry believes the Altar should be in actual life, a centre of union and fellowship, as if to teach us that no man can learn the truth for another, and no man can learn it alone.

The altar represents the most sacred Altar on earth which is at the centre of your being. This will be explained further in the Master Mason Degree.

Preparing for the Obligation

As part of the Candidate being properly prepared, the right arm, left breast, and left knee are made bare, and the right heel slipshod. Why is this so?

The left breast is obvious: it receives the sharp instrument at the entrance to the Lodge. In determining the purpose of the other parts made bare, consider the position in which the Candidate is placed before taking the Obligation. He is placed on his left knee, which is bare. He places his slipshod right foot on the floor at the Altar, and his bare right arm is covering the Volume of the Sacred Law. So, everything is made bare to enable close contact with the sacred area while taking the Obligation.

In the Entered Apprentice Degree, the Volume of the Sacred Law is open at Ruth chapter IV, verse 7. This verse states:

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

Now this does not make sense in itself and, even if you read the whole chapter, it may not be clear, so I will summarize. Ruth had been married to Mahlon, who died. There were no children and, therefore, no one to care for Ruth. It was tradition in those times for a kinsman to take responsibility for a widow and her property. This *obligation* was signified in public by the responsible person removing his shoe. The person who took responsibility in this case was Boaz, who was incidentally not a kinsman. Ruth and Boaz were the great-grandparents of King David, who was the father of King Solomon. So, Ruth ties in to Boaz, who ties in to Solomon, both of whom are mentioned in the Degree.

The Obligation

What is the purpose of the Obligation?

It asks you to make a promise that you will “always hele, ever conceal, and never reveal” the secrets or mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry.

Firstly, if you don’t already know, the word ‘hele’ is an old word meaning ‘to hide’.

Secondly, what *are* the “secrets or mysteries” that you are not to reveal?

The ritual says that the secrets of this degree are “those marks by which Masons are known to each other”. This means the signs, tokens and words that were communicated to you. We all know that these ‘secrets’ can be found in books and on the Internet, so why keep them secret? The reason is that this is the first real test of your character, of

your upholding the principles of Freemasonry, of fidelity. If you cannot keep this promise, then you don't belong in the Order.

We've dealt with the secrets, but what about the mysteries?

Traditionally, the Mysteries, and all secret Orders, require a vow of silence and secrecy from the Candidate, before Initiation, and entrustment with any secret information. The reasons for secrecy, and for being solemnly obligated to it, are much deeper than the need for silence about the formal secrets of the Order.

You should be aware that silence and secrecy are imposed more in interest of the individual himself, than in the Fraternity (which has hardly suffered from indiscreet exposures). Experience will teach the Candidate, later on, the deep personal value of silence, and the peril of premature and unwise speech: a peril pointed to in the penalty of the Obligation (and what it represents). Knowledge of the ancient mysteries and its practices is very personal, and is a difficult concept to be communicated in words and, if done so, can be misunderstood and misinterpreted by those not familiar with them. Esoteric orders will typically cut off communication with those who reveal secrets to the uninitiated. This is reflected in the penal clause, which is purely symbolic. This can also be understood as causing a disconnect between the mind (or soul) and the spirit, preventing further progress in understanding cosmic truths.

The penal signs in all the Degrees have a corresponding relationship with certain energy centres within our being. In the Hindu metaphysical tradition, and in some other philosophical systems, these are called Chakras. In the First Degree, the penal sign is related to the Throat Chakra, which has to do with communication.

Conclusion

Having taken the solemn Obligation of an Entered Apprentice Mason, the Candidate is then given the predominant wish of his heart: Light, and is then deemed to be a Brother Mason. 'Light' is obviously symbolic and, based on the information in this presentation, I hope that every newly initiated Brother will seek the light that lies at the heart of our ritual.