

# A Philosophical Background for Masonic Symbolism

by  
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## I. Introduction

Perhaps the title of this paper may seem a little strange. Each of us, as we contemplate the symbols of Freemasonry and seek to apply them in our lives, comes to understand them in a context which certainly has some philosophical dimension. In this way each Mason develops his own understanding of the Craft's symbolism and his own Masonic philosophy. Such a personal interpretation seems to me to be appropriate, desirable, and even necessary, if one is to receive the greatest benefit from membership in the Order. It also seems to me that an understanding of the underlying intentions of those Brethren who devised our ritual might be of real benefit to each Mason as he internalizes the Craft's symbols. Sadly, there is no authoritative information to provide such an understanding, but it is certainly possible for us to know what the intellectual community was thinking at the time Freemasonry came into being. That seems to be a likely frame of reference for starting to understand the intentions of our founders.

"Speculative Masonry", in the sense that we understand the term today, seems to appear first in the early-to-mid-seventeenth century. This is the period that marks the end of the Renaissance in England and Northern Europe, and it is to the Renaissance that we will turn for our frame of reference. We will start by stating (very briefly) the fundamental philosophical principles that comprised the essence of Renaissance thought. Then we will look at Freemasonry and suggest that: (1) those principles are reflected in the symbolic structure of the Order, and (2) our Masonic symbolic structure may well have been developed to communicate those principles. I must say that in the time available we will be unable to consider *all* the symbols of Freemasonry, but we will seek to cover those which provide the framework of the symbolism.

I must preface my remarks by stating specifically and unequivocally that the ideas presented are my own. They do not represent the attitudes or teachings of The United Grand Lodge of England or of any Private Lodge. If I fail to identify an idea as my opinion, it is simply to prevent clumsy repetition of "It seems to me.....".

The Renaissance is usually thought of as an explosion of art. It was certainly that; but it was very much more. Its philosophy was based on Judeo-Christian monotheism; but it was also characterized by a revival of interest in the Classical world and its thought (in particular the Greek and Roman civilizations) and by a strong neo-Platonic influence. Medieval scholars had been interested in classical philosophy from the point of view of reconciling it to Christian doctrine. Renaissance scholars were interested in classical philosophy for what it said about man, himself. These Renaissance philosophers incorporated a good many Greek (particularly neo-Platonic) and Jewish mystical ideas into their orthodox Christian thought. The first of these influences came principally from a body of writing called the *Hermetica* which originated in Alexandria sometime near the start of the Christian era. The *Hermetica* seems to be a form of early Egyptian philosophy with a heavy overlay of Hellenized Judaism and Christian thought; and it has been shown to have had substantial influence on the formation of early Christian doctrines.<sup>1</sup> The second of these influences came from Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of Judaism, which was dispersed throughout the Mediterranean basin by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Dame Francis A. Yates has called this fusion of Classical and Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> *Hermetica*, trans. Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993) pp. 14-5

philosophy the "Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition"<sup>2</sup>. After these two influences had been interpreted in the context of orthodox Christian doctrine, the Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition was fundamental to the philosophy of the early Renaissance. While it was subsequently repudiated by Counter-Reformation writers, it remained the essential core of Renaissance thought. Thus, I think the metaphysics of the Renaissance represents as close to a "general" statement of Western Metaphysics as we are likely to find. As we have said, Speculative Masonry dates from the end of the Renaissance, and it seems to me that Freemasonry is actually a codification of this thought that was at the core of the Renaissance.

Four fundamental ideas seem to characterize this Renaissance philosophical view: First, was Neo-Platonism. The Deity was considered to be without limit. Rather than thinking of the Deity as a creator - which must necessarily be separate from its creation and is, in that respect, limited - the Neo-Platonist understands the Deity to have projected *Itself* into existence as the entire universe. This results in a view of all existence as a single, tightly integrated unity centered on the Deity. A particularly straightforward statement of this view comes from the *Hermetica*: "...for God contains all things, and there is nothing that is not in God, and nothing which God is not. Nay, I would rather say, not that God *contains* all things, but that, to speak the full truth, God *is* all things."<sup>3</sup> This Hermetic statement of Neo-Platonism is not surprising, since The *Hermetica* comes from Alexandria at the time when that philosophy was emerging. Second, earthly experiences were considered to reflect events in the heavenly realms; the succinct statement of this idea is, "As above; so below." This epigram is a consequence of the integrated view of the world described above. In a universe regarded as a single, consistent, and Divine Entity, there must be a correspondence between that which occurs in the higher (psychological/spiritual) levels and that which occurs at the lower (earthly) ones.<sup>4</sup> This idea also includes the principle of the "Macrocosm and the Microcosm", the concept that the Universe, the Macrocosm, and Man, the Microcosm, are both created, formed and made "in the image of God"; and that the same set of laws operate in the experience of both. Third, the universe consists of four levels; Elemental, Celestial, Super-Celestial and Divine; and on each of these levels there are opposite or contrasting agencies which are held in balance. Fourth, knowledge of the "higher", or more subtle, aspects of the Universe was thought to be available only by personal experience (i.e. by one's own revelation); certainly not by logical argument, nor, ultimately, by faith in the authority of another's revelation.<sup>5</sup> This idea of "interior work", of turning within and seeking to experience the presence of an indwelling Deity, is as old as human civilization. It recurs periodically throughout the world's history in various cultural idioms and has been referred to as "the perennial philosophy".<sup>6</sup> I will suggest that the Masonic symbolism, as represented on the Tracing Boards, reflects these principles and the Hermetic / Kabbalistic idiom from which they are derived. It is in that sense that I suggest Freemasonry to be a codification of the philosophical essence of the Renaissance.

## **II. The First Degree Tracing Board.**

Viewed in the context we are considering, the First Degree is an introduction to the metaphysical principles associated with the interior work. Consider the First Degree Tracing Board (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup>Yates, Frances A., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (London, RKP, 1979), Introduction p. I

<sup>3</sup>*Hermetica*, trans. Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993), LIBELLVS IX, p. 185

<sup>4</sup>*Hermetica, the Emerald Tablet*

<sup>5</sup>Reuchlin, J., *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517, reprint Univ. Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993), Book Two, for example

<sup>6</sup>Huxley, Aldous; *The Perennial Philosophy*; (Chatto & Windus, London, 1946)

This drawing, which seems at first glance to be a heterogeneous collection of Masonic objects, is actually a coherent picture. It is, indeed, a representation of God, the Universe, and Everything. It is also a picture of a human being standing in a landscape. Neither of these images is immediately obvious; but I hope I can argue convincingly that they are, at least, reasonable interpretations of the data.

## Ornaments

The central ideas fundamental to Renaissance thought were Neo-Platonism, the unity of all being and the consequent omnipresence of the Deity. For me, these ideas are represented on the First Degree Board by a group of three symbols that are called, collectively, the "Ornaments of the Lodge". The fact that the Masons who formulated our symbolism gathered these three objects into a single group seems to require that we consider them together and in relationship to each other. The Ornaments of the Lodge are the "Blazing Star or Glory, the Chequered Pavement, and the Indented, Tessellated Border"<sup>7</sup>; and I will suggest that they are all intended to refer to the Deity. The Blazing Star or Glory is found in the center of the picture (Figure 1). We can be sure that it is not a representation of what today's astronomers would call a "stellar object." Stellar objects (stars) are to be found with the Moon in the upper left of the picture. In fact, the Blazing Star or Glory is a straightforward heraldic representation of the Deity. Figure 2 shows the obverse of the Great Seal of The United States. You will see the Deity represented there in the same manner. The Blazing Star or Glory, shown on the First Degree Board in the Heavens, represents the Deity as *It is*, in all Its Glory, as It projects Itself into existence. The Chequered Pavement represents the Deity *as It is perceived to be* at the opposite pole of consciousness, here on Earth in ordinary life. The light and dark squares represent paired opposites, a mixture of mercy and justice, reward and punishment, passion and analysis, vengeance and loving kindness. The squares also represent the human experience of life, light and dark, good and evil, ease and difficulty. But that is only how it is *perceived*. The *squares* are not the symbol; the *Pavement* is the symbol. The light and dark squares fit together with exact nicety to form the Pavement, a single thing, a unity. The whole is surrounded by the Tessellated Border which binds the drawing into a single symbol. In this representation on the Tracing Board, the Border binds not simply the squares of the Pavement, but the entire picture, into a unity. The Tassels can be thought of as representing the Divine agency that operates throughout the whole.



**Figure 2**

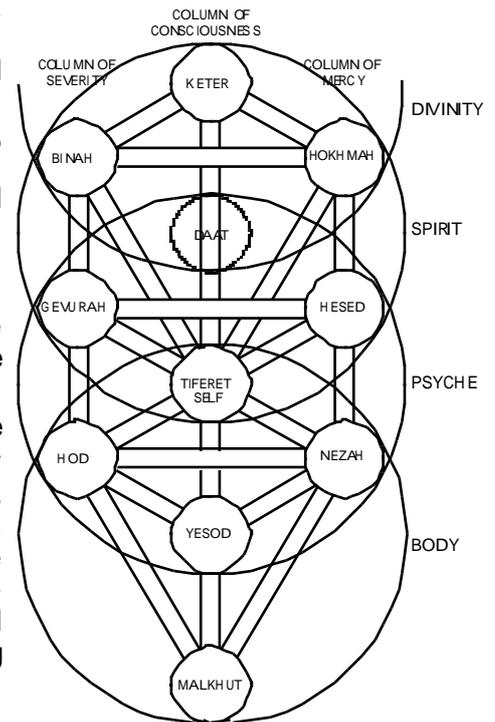
## Columns

Except in the case of the Glory, which stands alone, the symbols of duality occur throughout the Board: from the black and white squares at the bottom to the Sun and Moon, an ancient symbol for the paired opposites of masculine and feminine, at the top. In the central area of the Board duality is represented by two of the three columns; but here, as we rise from the fixed duality of the elemental existence in the physical world, the third column introduces a new idea. The striking thing about these columns is that each is of a different Order of Architecture. In Masonic symbolism they are assigned names: Wisdom to the Ionic Column in the middle, Strength to the

<sup>7</sup>Dyer, Colin, *Symbolism in Craft Freemasonry*; (Lewis, Shepperton, 1983);p. 113

Doric Column on the left, and Beauty to the Corinthian Column on the right.<sup>8</sup> How shall we interpret these Columns and their names?

As we have seen, one of the principal components of Renaissance thought was Kabbalah, and, in particular, it was the Sephardi Kabbalah which spread throughout the Mediterranean area with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. During the Renaissance several very significant books were written on the subject of Kabbalah.<sup>9</sup> One of the principal diagrams used by Kabbalists to communicate their ideas is the "Tree of Life" which is shown in the adjacent figure.<sup>10</sup> The column on the right is called the "Column of Mercy" and is the active column. That on the left is called the "Column of Severity" and is the constraining column. The central column is called the "Column of Consciousness"; it is the column of equilibrium with the role of keeping the other two in balance. When the Tree is used to represent a model of the Universe, groups of ideas such as revelation, expansive growth, and passion are associated with the right (active) column. Groups of ideas such as principled understanding, disciplined restraint, and classification / analysis are associated with the left (constraining) column. Ideas and agencies relating to consciousness that keeps the active and constraining forces in balance are found on the central column. The three columns all terminate in (depend upon) Divinity at the top of the central column. Look again at the columns on the First Degree Tracing Board (Figure 1). The Corinthian Pillar of Beauty is on the right, and in our lectures it is associated with vigour, expansion and growth.<sup>11</sup> The Doric Pillar of Strength is on the left, and its elegant simplicity suggests such things as discipline, restraint, and stability. The Ionic Pillar of Wisdom is in the middle. The Ionic Order is an intermediate between the other two - not so simple as the Doric, less ornate than the Corinthian. The Three Pillars, like the Tree of Life, speak of a universe in which expansive and constraining forces are held in balance by a coordinating agency.



## Four Worlds

The Universe as it was perceived<sup>12</sup> by the Renaissance philosophers consisted of "four worlds." The Hermetica describes such a division with each of the four worlds associated with one of the "elements."<sup>13</sup> Kabbalah has the same division as the figure on the right indicates.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Dyer, C.; *op. cit.*; p.72

<sup>9</sup>e.g. Reuchlin, *op. cit.* and Agrippa, H. C.; *De Occulta Philosophia*, (Antwerp, 1531) ed Donald Tyson, (reprint Llewellyn, St. Paul, 1993)

<sup>10</sup>For an accessible introduction to Kabbalah see Halevi, Zev ben Shimon, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree*, (Bristol, Gateway, 1974)

<sup>11</sup>Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Masonry;(Ian Allan Regalia, 1997);p.128

<sup>12</sup>This word is chosen carefully. They *conceived* of the Universe as a highly integrated unity; they *perceived* it (as incarnate humans do) as having this hierarchical structure.

<sup>13</sup>*Hermetica*, trans. W. Scott (Boston, Shambhala, 1985) Stobaeus, Excerpt XXIV, p495

They are the "elemental" or physical world of the body, the "celestial" world of the psyche or soul, the "supercelestial" world of spirit, and the Divine world. We can see that these same levels are represented on the First Degree Board (Figure 1). The four levels are more obvious if we remember that the symbol is taken from a time when the universe was considered to be geocentric with earth at the center and heaven beyond the stars. The Pavement represents the "elemental", physical world, the central part of the Board including the columns and most of the symbols, represents the "celestial" world of the psyche or soul, the Heavens represent the "supercelestial" world of the spirit, and the Glory, as we have seen, represents the Divinity.

Thus far we have considered how this picture can be understood as a representation of the structure of the universe as it was conceived by the intellectual community in the Renaissance. That is the "landscape." Where is the man?

## The Man

Remember that one of the ideas fundamental to Renaissance thought was the concept of a Macrocosm (seen as the universe as a whole) and a corresponding Microcosm (seen as the human individual). The idea is that the universe and human beings are structured using the same principles, both having been made "in the image of God"; and that in the course of events there is always a correspondence between activity in the greater and lesser worlds. This is a necessary consequence of the Neo-Platonic principle of "Oneness." We have seen that in the *Hermetica*, "As above, so below," sums up this idea; and it was stated in detail in England in the early 17th century by Robert Fludd in his *History of the Two Worlds*.<sup>15</sup>

Thus far we have avoided speaking of one of the principal features of the Board, the Ladder. On the First Degree Board it extends from the Scripture open on the Pedestal to the Glory that represents the Deity; and in the Masonic symbolism, it is said to be Jacob's Ladder. We will consider the ladder together with another symbol, the Point-within-a-Circle-Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines, which can be seen on the face of the Pedestal that supports the Scripture. Why should we consider these two symbols together? Look at the Frontispiece from *Masonic Miscellanies* (Figure 3). As in many early Masonic drawings the Ladder and the Circle bounded by Parallel Lines appear together as if they have some connection. Consider the Two Parallel Lines first. They, like the Doric and Corinthian columns, represent paired opposites, active and passive qualities. Why are they opposites? Because in Masonic symbolism they are said to represent Moses (the Prophet) and Solomon (the Lawgiver). In earlier Workings, before the symbolic structure was de-Christianized, the lines are associated with the Saints John.<sup>16</sup> Since the Baptist's Day is Midsummer, and the Evangelist's Day is Midwinter, we see substantially the same idea. The ladder with its "three principal rounds", Faith, Hope, and Charity, rises between the two parallels to the "Blazing Star or Glory".

Now, when we look at this Point-within-a-Circle-Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines together with the Ladder and its three levels, we see a pattern very similar to the three columns. There are three verticals, two of which relate to active and constraining functions while the third, the Ladder, reaches to the heavens and provides the means by which we hope to ascend thereto.<sup>17</sup> The ladder, which I think of as a representation of individual consciousness, has "three principal

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<sup>14</sup> Halevi, op cit. p.28 Renaissance literature is not uniform in this respect. Such a hierarchy is generally present, but some authors describe "three worlds" and seem to lump Divinity and spirit together.

<sup>15</sup> Fludd, R., *Utriusque Cosmi, Historia*, (Oppenheim, De Bry, 1617-9)

<sup>16</sup> Dyer, C.; *op.cit.*;pp.98-9

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*;pp.94-5

rounds" or levels, represented by Faith, Hope and Charity (they are so labeled in Figure 3) which correspond to the three lower levels of the four-level Universe we observed earlier. Both the Macrocosmic "Landscape" and the Microcosmic "Man" share the same source, the fourth level of Divinity, represented by the Blazing Star, or Glory, from which they both emerge. Taken together the Ladder and the Point-within-a-Circle-Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines represent the human individual, made "in the image of God," according to the same principles on which the Universe is based.

## East West Direction

There is one more idea upon which we should touch before we leave the First Degree Board. A Mason is sometimes called "a travelling man," and one of the Masonic catechisms gives us a little insight into this seldom used epithet. "Q. - Did you ever Travel? A. - My forefathers did. Q.- Where did they travel? A. - Due East and West. Q. - What was the object of their travels? A. - They traveled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained."<sup>18</sup>

Notice the cardinal points of the compass on the Border of the First Degree Tracing Board (Figure 1). They define the East West direction as it is to be understood in terms of Masonic Symbolism, and in doing so they make some comment about the nature of the journey which the new Mason apprentices himself to undertake. That journey from West to East is represented, symbolically, by the progress through the Masonic Degrees; and it is, in fact, the ascent up Jacob's Ladder, one of the "Principal Rounds" for each Degree.

Indeed, from the point of view from which we are speaking, the "East - West Dimension" as shown on the Tracing Boards is the dimension of consciousness: ordinary consciousness of the physical world at the West and consciousness of the Divine Presence at the East. As we have seen, the notion of a "mystical ascent" was part and parcel of the Hermetic / Kabbalistic Tradition. It is a devotional exercise, conducted in the context of the religious belief of each individual, during which the individual rises through the worlds of the soul and the spirit and at last finds himself experiencing the presence of the Deity. Reuchlin describes such an ascent in *De Arte Kabbalistica*<sup>19</sup> where the result is achieved by means of contemplation of the Divine Name and Seventy Two verses selected from the Psalms; another can be found in the *Hermetica* which is an example of a seven level ascent in an astrological idiom.<sup>20</sup> Some of these ascents are deeply Christian in their character. In *De Occulta Philosophia*, Agrippa "rises through the three worlds, the elemental world, the celestial world, the supercelestial world....where he is in contact with angels, where the Trinity is proved, .... the Hebrew names of God are listed, though the Name of Jesus is now the most powerful of all Names."<sup>21</sup> As he starts on the interior journey the Mason is inexperienced; and he must depend upon his interior guidance, that is, he must practise the first of the Cardinal Virtues, Faith.

Let us look now at how these ideas are represented in the Second Degree. We will find that the Second Degree Tracing Board is a detailed drawing of a part of the First. Of what part? Of the man who was standing in the landscape.

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<sup>18</sup> Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Masonry; (Ian Allan Regalia, 1997); p.107

<sup>19</sup> Reuchlin, J. *op. cit.* Book Three p.277

<sup>20</sup> *Hermetica*, trans., Scott, W., (Boston, Shambhala, 1993), LIBELLVS I, p.129

<sup>21</sup> Yates, Frances A., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (London, RKP, 1979) p.63

### **III. The Second Degree Tracing Board**

As the First Degree was a presentation of the metaphysical principles associated with the interior work, so the Second Degree focuses on the work to be done by the individual in the course of Masonic Labour. Consider the Second Degree Tracing Board (Figure 4). The first thing that stands out about the Second Degree Board is that it is an illustration of an interior. This is in marked contrast to the previous Board that seems to be an exterior. Moreover, the drawing is designed in such a way as to suggest that the Mason who embarks on the Second Degree comes from the outdoors and enters the building for that purpose. But entering this building is an idea that takes some understanding. Notice the "sun". It is inside the building; and it is a very unusual structure that has the sun shining inside. I think that the luminary is not the physical sun; rather it is the Blazing Star or Glory that we have seen at the top of the Ladder on the First Degree Board. Indeed, the representation suggests that in spite of the beautifully detailed art work, this is not a picture of a physical structure. This is a representation of one's self; it is "The Temple" in the context of the teaching in the Western version of the Great Light, "...ye are the Temple...". The ear of corn by the fall of water suggests a situation of natural maturation and fruition that enables the individual to initiate this process of interior ascent.

#### **Columns and Stairs**

The next striking thing to observe about this Board is the fact that here (once again) we have two columns (also, as we will see, representing opposites) with a ladder (it has become a staircase) between them. This is another reason for thinking that this is a detailed drawing of the "person" we saw in the Tracing Board of the First Degree. What all this suggests is that the individual who embarks on the Labour of the Second Degree, having learned the general philosophical lessons in the First, is about to undertake some interior journey. The idea certainly fits with the Renaissance view that, as we have seen, considered the approach to the Deity to be an interior journey, an ascent in consciousness through the worlds of the soul and spirit.

The Masonic Lectures assign characteristics to the two pillars which indicate that they represent paired opposites. First, they are said to be a memorial of the Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire that guided the Children of Israel (by day and night, respectively) during the Exodus; and second, on their tops they have representations of the Celestial and Terrestrial Spheres<sup>22</sup>. Like Jacob's Ladder on the First Degree Board, the Staircase forms the central column of this "three pillar model." The Mason is expected to "climb" this symbolic staircase in the course of his life as he does symbolically during the ritual; and the Masonic symbolism sets out a curriculum for him that will facilitate that ascent. This particular drawing shows fifteen steps, as do all of the Second Degree Boards drawn by Harris that I have seen. Personally, I am inclined to think that a picture of fifteen steps is an innovation. Earlier Tracing Boards and Masonic Diagrams show the staircase with only seven steps. For example, a seven step staircase shown in the Frontispiece to *Masonic Miscellanies* (Figure 3) is typical. I do not suggest that these early diagrams omit any of the material related to the fifteen steps with which contemporary Masons are familiar. Rather, the Masonic Lectures suggest that there really are only seven steps, with the three included in the five, and the five included in the seven.<sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, the literature of the Renaissance is replete with mystical ascents, and it seems to me, that the Staircase outlines seven stages through which one must pass on such an interior journey. Masonic Lectures relating to the Staircase associate a good deal of information

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<sup>22</sup>Emulation Ritual; (Lewis Masonic, c. 1980); pp. 143-4

<sup>23</sup>Emulation Ritual; (Lewis Masonic, c. 1980); p. 147

with each of the various steps. Specifically, the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences are related to the seven steps; and the Five Classical Orders of Architecture are related to the top five.<sup>24</sup> These subjects comprised the formal educational curriculum of the Renaissance, and there is a large body of literature associated with each. The intent of that curriculum was certainly to teach the metaphysics to which we have referred above and to give the student an orientation toward the sort of contemplative intellectual work we are discussing. If we consider the Staircase to be a representation of levels of consciousness through which the individual must ascend, we can see that the symbol refers the Mason to information about each step, or level of consciousness, through which he must pass along the way. The Masonic explanation of the Staircase also associates the seven Officers of the Lodge with the seven steps and three principal characters from Masonry's traditional history with the three highest steps.<sup>25</sup> That association assists in the understanding of progress through the positions of the Officers of the Lodge and in the interpretation of some Masonic Legends.

It is worth noting that the bottom of the Staircase is guarded by the Junior Warden who will demand a password before one is allowed to ascend. The story associated with this word<sup>26</sup> assures us that, if one attempts to climb the interior stairs of his own consciousness without the appropriate motive and without having done the necessary preparatory work outlined in the First Degree, he will be in serious trouble. It is a note of caution to those who may wish to put this interpretation of Masonic symbolism into practice for themselves.

### **Middle Chamber**

The Staircase leads to a room called the Middle Chamber where Masons were said to go to receive their wages. In this room he also has access to the Perfect Ashlar. A Perfect Ashlar is a building stone that has been completed and is ready to be placed in the building. It is found in the Middle Chamber "for the experienced Craftsmen to try and adjust their jewels (tools) on."<sup>27</sup> We don't want to devote a great deal of space to working tools, but Masons will recognize that the Fellowcraft's tools are tools of measurement and testing, that all measure against absolute criteria, that two of them measure against criteria which are opposite one another, while the third defines the relationship between the other two. Given an environment in which paired opposites are held in balance by a coordinating agency, those tools seem to me to be a functional model of morality. Tools of morality, together with the Perfect Ashlar, a standard against which to calibrate them (i.e. conscience), all found in an interior Middle Chamber (within the Mason's own being) seem to me to be a pregnant idea. All this happens in the place where one "receives his wages"; that is, where he gets what he deserves. The fact that all this takes place *within one's own being* is worth thinking about. In the Middle Chamber, an interior room (interior to the Mason himself), the individual is able to see the "Letter G", a representation of the Deity.<sup>28</sup> While this is not the Divine Presence, it is an indication of progress in the interior work; and the Mason perceiving it may enjoy the second of the Cardinal Virtues, Hope.

Lastly, notice the gallery above the door to the Middle Chamber. There seems to be no purpose for it in the picture, but it is light blue - the color associated with the world of the spirit. I suggest

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<sup>24</sup> Emulation Ritual; (Lewis Masonic, c. 1980); pp. 147-8

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Emulation Ritual; (Lewis Masonic, c. 1980); p. 145-6

<sup>27</sup> Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Masonry; (Ian Allan Regalia, 1997); p.72

<sup>28</sup> Dyer, C.; *op. cit.*; p.p. 84-90

that the gallery is there to represent that spiritual level; and in this way, this picture of “the Temple that we are” reflects the four-level structure which we have seen before.

#### **IV. The Third Degree Tracing Board**

##### **The Coffin**

In this Third Degree Tracing Board (Figure 5), the image of the Coffin probably does not refer to physical death. During the Renaissance (as in most periods of Christian history prior to the Enlightenment), there was a good deal of discussion among the intelligentsia about the nature of the biblical story of "the Fall of man" and its effect.<sup>29</sup> To them "the Fall" seems to have referred to some event by which human beings, who were at one time conscious of the Divine Presence, lost that consciousness. One of their conclusions was that ordinary human life, as it we live it on a day-to-day basis (that is, after the Fall) is "like death"<sup>30</sup> when compared to human potential and to a life lived in the conscious awareness of the presence of God. It seems to me that one interpretation of the Tracing Board is that the grave suggests such a "death" to be our present state. The plant growing at the head of the grave suggests first, that we are like vegetables when compared to our potential; and second, that there is a spark of life which can be encouraged to grow. In this sense the plant refers to the possibility of regaining our original Divine connection that was lost with the “expulsion from Eden”.

##### **King Solomon’s Porch**

The view of the Temple shows "King Solomon's Porch" which is said to be the entrance to the "Holy of Holies." In the picture the veil is drawn back a little offering a glimpse into that chamber where the Deity was said to reside. This suggests a second interpretation of the Tracing Board: that, at the end of the journey from West to East, some process analogous to death enables the individual to experience the Divine Presence. W. L. Wilmshurst has described the Master Mason’s Degree in such terms: “Hence the third degree is that of mystical death, of which bodily death is taken as figurative..... . In all the Mystery-systems of the past will be found this degree of mystical death as an outstanding and essential feature prior to the final stage of perfection or regeneration.”<sup>31</sup> I think that this refers neither to a physical resurrection after physical death nor to a nonphysical life after physical death; both of which are the concerns of religion. The thing that dies is one’s concept of “one’s self” as an independent, separate being. That concept of one’s self must die, because it is an illusion; an independent, separate person cannot exist, if there be a Divine Being that is without limit. Certainly, the posture into which the Master Mason is raised suggests an intimate “oneness” with some higher aspect of one’s being - I think it is one’s Spirit; and it is that oneness, that expanded awareness, which enables one to experience the Divine Presence. After this process has occurred, the Mason following this path lives once more at his full potential in which state he is conscious of the Divine Presence and the universal flow of Divine Love. It seems to me that this symbolic death refers to a psychological/spiritual process which can occur within any devout individual who seeks it earnestly, and I believe it to

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<sup>29</sup> e.g. Reuchlin, J. *op cit.* Book One, pp. 70-3

<sup>30</sup> For a good presentation of this concept, as well as an introduction to the Art of Music as it was understood in the context of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, see Streich, Hildamare, Music, Alchemy and Psychology in Atalanta Fugiens of Michael Maier. This essay can be found in Maier, M. *Atalanta Fugiens*, trans. / ed. Godwin, J. (Grand Rapids, MI, Phanes, 1992) p80.

<sup>31</sup> Wilmshurst, W. L.; quoted in Dyer, C. *op. cit.*; p.p. 138-9

be the business of Freemasonry to encourage this experience. After all we claim to be *Freemasons*, and this is that Truth, the knowing of which "make(s) you free."

### **Points of the Compass**

We saw earlier that Masons traveled "Due East and West". "They travelled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained," as the Lecture in the First Degree has it. Notice that on this Board the cardinal points of the compass have been reversed, and West is now at the top where East is on the First Degree Board. This suggests that the Master Mason (Master in fact, not simply Master in titular rank), the individual who is represented by the symbolism depicted here, has changed his orientation and started his Westward journey. It is a journey during which the Master Mason allows the Divine Love that he has experienced to flow through him to all with whom he interacts. It also involves the teaching and charitable nurturing of those who are following the interior ascent - with all the obligations that sort of thing implies. In doing so he practices the third of the Cardinal Virtues, Charity.

### **V. Conclusion**

This is an unusual interpretation of the symbols of Freemasonry; but not, I think, an unrealistic one. While there is no physical data linking the Craft to the Hermetic/Kabbalistic Tradition of the Renaissance, it certainly seems reasonable to think that the Masons who founded our order were in tune with the intellectual frame of reference of their time. From my own point of view, the use of this interpretation integrates the symbolic structure into a much richer system of instruction. One which has proven to be of immense value.