

THE LEGEND OF HIRAM ABIFF

by Jerry Marsengill
Presented October 29, 1988

Hiram Abiff, the widow's son, is the principal character in the second section of the Master Mason's degree. He has become the central figure in most rites and in most countries. Yet compared to much of the Masonic ritual and Masonic tradition, Hiram is a newcomer.

Regardless of Dr. Mackey, who was quite proficient in formulating and interpreting landmarks, the legend of Hiram is not a landmark of the craft. Mackey states that landmark 2 is the division of symbolic Masonry into three degrees and that landmark 3 is the Legend of the third degree.

Unfortunately we know the date when the third degree was first conferred. It was in 1726 in London in the Society for Music and Architecture. Some four years later in 1730, we find the first reference to the Hiram legend.

In 1726, according to the Graham manuscript, the craft was still using the legend of Noah and his three sons. According to Coil and I will use his writing, since he has translated the manuscript into modern words: "We have it by tradition and still some reference to scripture that Shem, Ham and Japeth went to their father Noah's grave to try to find something about him to lead them to the veritable secret which this famous preacher had, for all things needful for the new world were in the Ark with Noah. Now these 3 men had agreed that, if they did not find the very thing itself, that the first thing they did find was to be to them as a secret thing not doubting but did most firmly believe that God was able and would cause what they did find to prove as veritable to them as if they had received the secret at first from God himself. So they came to the grave finding nothing but the dead body almost consumed. Taking a grip at a finger, it came away; so from Joint to Joint; so to the wrist; so to the elbow; so they reared up the dead body and supported it; setting foot to foot, knee to knee, breast to breast, cheek to cheek and hand to back, and cried out: 'Help, O, father,' as if they had said; 'O, Father of Heaven, help us now for our earthly father cannot.'" So they laid down the dead body again and not knowing what to do, one, said: 'Here is yet marrow in the bone;' and the second said: 'But a dry bone,' and the third said; 'It stinketh.' So they agreed to give it a name as is known to Freemasonry to this day."

The first record we have of the Hiram legend being introduced into Masonry occurs in 1730 when Prichard published Masonry Dissected. He refers to Hiram as Grand Master Hiram. Prichard also tells both the story of Noah and the story of Hiram in this expose. The Hiram legend, wherever it came from, and we have no way of knowing was still changing until the year 1738. In his Constitutions of 1738 Dr. James Anderson said that after the Temple was completed "their joy was soon interrupted by the death of their dear Master, Hiram Abiff, whom they decently interred in the Lodge near the Temple according to ancient usage."

Now the Hiram legend is just that, a legend. Some of the proposed explanations for the legend are:

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I have read most of the mystery plays of the middle ages and am unable to find any traces of the Hiram legend in them. Nor can I find anything which might be made into the Hiram legend. My personal feelings are that the Hiram legend is myth, loosely based on some of the characters of the Old Testament.

If the Old Testament is read carefully, we find no less than five Hiram in its words. Most of these could be Hiram Abiff's with a little care in translation.

Albert Pike states that the word "Hiram" could be better translated "Khurum." Most translations have the name as Hiram or Hiram with the exception of the Septuagint which uses Cheiram pronounced Kiram. I propose that the name should be better translated as Ch'iam which in Hebrew is life. Then the name Hiram Abiff, rather than meaning "Hiram, his father's" becomes the "Father of Life." In the book of Exodus we find that the ground opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan and Abiram. (Abiram, Ab Hiram or Ab Ch'iam.). When Hiel rebuilt Jericho we find that he set up the gates thereof in his youngest son Abiram. Again, Ab Ch'iam is used as a foundation sacrifice. Our Biblical Hiram was knocked on the head just before the completion of the Temple. Could he have been a sacrifice? Adoniram or Adon (The Lord) Hiram, was slain by the workmen later in the book of Kings. Is there a possibility that all of these deaths are interlinked as foundation sacrifices, and rather than Hiram Abiff's being an actual man, that the name was given to the one who was to be sacrificed much as we find the sacrifices of the kings in James Fraser's "Golden Bough"? It makes for interesting speculation.

Certainly, human sacrifice was not unknown among the Israelites. We still have a few mentions of it in the Bible where the translators were not careful enough to, clean it up. For example take the story of Jephthah's daughter. I find no record that God said "stop." Instead, it appears that the girl, Adah, was sacrificed.

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We also read that they allowed their sons and daughters to pass through the fire to "Molech". Rather than being a pagan god, Moloch, is merely the word Melech with the vowels from the word "bosheth" *i.e.* shameful, substituted. In plain words the sacrifices of the children were made to Yahweh himself, the king of the gods.

The place where children were sacrificed was called a tophet and a tophet has been found just outside the walls of Jerusalem in the valley of Hinnom. Or we can say Ge Hinnom, where comes our word for "hell" Gehenna."

Micah says "shall I give my first born for my sins?" In other words is the sacrifice of a son necessary? We find far too much evidence of human sacrifice in our Bible to ignore this as a possibility.

Now, since we have gone through the possibilities as to where our Hiram legend might have originated, can we say that this was the purpose of those who wrote our Masonic legend? Certainly not! The Hiram legend is a myth intended to teach a lesson. It is real in the same sense that the parables of Jesus are real. They are invented stories intended to make a strong point. The myths which have grown up around the Mother of Jesus and the Christ myth which has become part of our belief in Jesus are other fine examples. They are not necessarily true but they are based on truth and are intended to teach important lessons. The legend of Hiram Abiff is intended to teach fortitude, integrity, faith and fidelity. It is not intended to teach resurrection, no matter how many Masonic students and officers state that that is his purpose. The falsity of the resurrection teaching is obvious within the legend. You don't resurrect someone and then turn around and bury him again.

What we have in the Hiram legend is an example of the Masonic life and how that life should be lived extensively illustrated. We also have enough leeway so that a man can make his own interpretation of what the Hiram legend should mean to him. We will never know when the Hiram legend was invented. We will never know what meaning those who adopted the legend to craft Masonry meant to give it. We can only surmise that the Hiram legend, like the legends which we find in most cultures, is intended to symbolize the actions of the perfect man. Regardless of what meaning we give to our legend, we can plainly state that the legend, like all of Freemasonry, is intended to give us a chart to follow to a more perfect and a more spiritual life.