

Those Mysterious Pillars

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In being associated with construction and in having our lodges as a representation of King Solomon's Temple, there is in myself and perhaps many others, a wonderment of the origin, the design, and the building, of this magnificent structure. Many individuals care not how their home is erected, only that the paint, the woodwork, and the carpets are pleasing and appealing to the eye. But for many others, there is the challenge of how it was fashioned, if the design and craftsmanship were of the finest available. If it was built strong enough to withstand the test of time and the physical demands which are to be placed upon it.

To perform an in-depth study of King Solomon's Temple would consume many pages and consummate a book in itself. Let us instead narrow our scope of view and pursue one of the most outstanding and manifest features of King Solomon's Temple, the two stalwart pillars, which guarded the Temple's entrance, and that which we would view, if we were approaching on foot from a westerly direction.

The first complete architectural reference of the two pillars in our Fellow craft lecture deals very extensively with the design, height, weight, how they were cast, the location of their casting, the symbolic meaning of their adornments, where they were positioned, and the decorous names which are associated with them.

These twin pillars are now, and as they have been, very prosaic features in all of our Masonic Lodge rooms. But their placement is not uniform, or standardized, through out the balance of the Masonic world. As an illustration, in England and many other countries abroad, the two pillars are usually displayed in front of the Master's chair.

In the United States, the earliest description, from the 1700's, show both Wardens seated in the west, facing the Master. The two pillars were generally near them, forming a kind of portal, so candidates passed between them during their admission, to gaining access, to the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple, a custom we have modified, and which inherently, we carry out today. In George Washington Lodge Number 22 A.F.& A.M. in Alexandria Virginia, the two pillars are found on one side of the Junior Warden's station in the south, perhaps to add strength to our Masonic thoughts that it was our first Junior Warden who originally fashioned them.

The application and employment of the two pillars, is common throughout the United States, where they are customarily placed at the northwest corner, near the entrance to the candidate's preparation room, preparatory to the Fellow craft lecture. But in this present time, and as every lodge seems to do something different, some have the pillars on either side of the Master's chair, at the entrance to the lodge room, or even on the right and left side of the Senior Wardens chair. There are some lodges and jurisdictions, where the two pillars are on the south of the Masters chair, or even positioned in the south with the Junior Warden, and in some portions of the world, they are not represented at all. The pillars seem to be physically represented by two ornately decorous columns which are always standing in their place, at the Senior Warden's and the Junior Warden's stations. The Senior Warden's and the Junior Warden's columns are typically about twenty five inches long, and symbolically, but perhaps mistakenly, are taken to be supports for the porch of King Solomon's Temple.

In the United States, and undoubtedly elsewhere as well, these two small columns now standing on the Senior Warden's and the Junior Warden's pedestals are merely symbols of their relationship with the pillars and their original attachment with antiquity is completely forgotten. These pillars are theorized by a few to have been structural members supporting the roof of a porch, leading into the Temple. There was in King Solomon's day, supported between these two pillars, a large traverse screen, or drape, to ward off the wind and retain the late afternoon sun from shining into the Temple itself. One question in our minds might be: Were they an architectural feature or an ornamental feature used to garnish the beauty of the Temple?

There is a majority of Masonic scholars who hold to the fact that the two pillars were free standing columns, conceptually ornamental and of emblematic disposition, just as they are depicted in our Fellow craft lecture. There are satisfactory reason, given elsewhere (in other Masonic papers), for the general belief that they were free standing and symbolic in character, being symbols of Deity.

The pillars of King Solomon's Temple may have been set up more specifically as an imitation of the obelisks that have been found at the entrance to many Egyptian Temples; additionally they may have been copied from Tyre, the home of Hiram Abif, where it is reported two pillars, which were fashioned of gold and emerald stood guard at the entrance to the Temple of Hercules. Also in Syria, recent excavations have uncovered a small chapel with two pillars, standing freely near the entrance, which appeared to be purely ornamental or symbolic in design, rather than architecturally supporting any part of the building.

Several sets of discrepancies, with consideration to the pillars, are to be observed in the Biblical account. The first of these is in regard to their height, which is given as thirty five cubits in II Chronicles, and as eighteen cubits in the books of I Kings and II Kings. The length of a cubit is normally taken to be a foot and one half, and the royal cubit, which was used in the building of King Solomon's Temple, was the equivalent to about twenty one inches. The Genoa Bible, printed in 1560, has this to say: "Every one was eighteen cubits long, but one half of a cubic could not be seen, for it was hidden in the roundness of the chapter and therefore he giveth it as seventeen and one half cubits in height."

The question of the actual height has been commonly scrutinized to be of minor interest only. But as an interesting aspect, in 1903, the Grand Lodge of Iowa took a poll of all other American jurisdictions (and one Canadian) with respect to the question of Masonic usage of the pillars in their area. Four jurisdiction did not reply, but of the forty four who did, fourteen attested to the fact, that they used the eighteen cubits figure, while twenty seven utilized thirty five cubits as the total height, and one curiously enough used thirty. Four jurisdictions indicated that the height was either not given or not regarded in their lectures, while one declined giving any information on the grounds that it alleged it to be an improper request.

It is universally conceived that the two pillars were cast in one piece, and this common belief is expressed and emphasized in the Fellow craft lecture, which informs us that the pillars were cast of a hollow nature and to function as repositories. This explanation is only partially correct. For from a foundry man's viewpoint they may have been cast a handbreadth, or four inches in thickness, not only to reduce the weight, but also to simplify the casting.

As a result the central core of sand or clay was, most surely and laboriously, scooped out to aid the workers to trans-*port* and erect these mammoth pillars. The brass castings in themselves would have weighed about twenty seven tons, and being confronted with the task of moving so massive of a casting the twenty five miles or so from their origin to their destination of King Solomon's Temple, would have necessitated that they were cast in a hollow fashion. We should though, bear in mind, that a pair of obelisks in front of the Temple of Karnak, which was erected some four centuries before King Solomon's Pillars, were said to have been almost ninety eight feet in height, and to have weighed approximately three hundred and fifty tons each. Such pillars in the Babylonian era were made hollow and contained the rules of deportment and behavior, as well as the etiquette governing the rites of the religious ceremonies, also to carefully preserve the properties, and the precious ancient writings.

Furthermore, there has been a good deal of speculation among Masonic scholars as to whether the designation of the pillars as "right" and "left" is from a viewpoint of a person entering or leaving the Temple. On one basis, the two pillars must be assumed as they would be first viewed when entering the temple from the outside. A worshiper leaving the Temple, and his view as to their placement would be unrealistic, for before he could leave, he must have first entered. Many writers, of Masonic papers, have contested this question. A person can only enter the Temple from the outside, when leaving he would be departing or exiting to the outside.

Another interesting facet which comes to the speculative Mason's mind deals with the meaning of the two names given in the Bible to these two pillars. It appears to have been the custom among the ancient mid-eastern people to give names to their sacred and religious objects. It is stated (in Exodus 17:15), "And Moses built an alter, and called the name of it Jehovahnissi". This name which Moses endowed upon the alter, when translated from the ancient Hebrew effectively states "God's Sacred and Holy Vestments". Thus we can establish the fact that the two pillars were not merely articles of architectural design and function, but also must have been objects of blessed sacraments, in relation to the names which were used to adore them.

These two pillars also served as memorials of God's repeated commitment of support to His people of Israel and of a vision, which came to David, the father of King Solomon, where the voice of God proclaimed, (I Kings 9:5) "Then I will establish the Throne of thy Kingdom upon Israel forever, as I have promised to David thy father".

But why two pillars, if but one Deity is represented? This question could contain an entire topic in itself. Let us suffice to say that in the times of primitive people, that the gods went in pairs, male and female. Quite possibly this ancient custom was to retain their identity with the past, and therefore stood for male and female, who were the active and passive principles in nature.

Still some other points for the contemplative Mason to view and reflect upon would be the adornment and number of pomegranates, as well as the number of rows which were round about the chapter.

To summarize this topic of the two twin pillars, we must learn to open our minds and hearts to all of mankind, to remember that each and every person on this earth of ours needs championship, understanding, inspiration, and above all, the love and guidance of our Supreme Architect.

To attempt to understand what the original intentions of these two pillars were designed to symbolize is lost somewhere in the chronicles of unwritten history dating to the emanation from the prehistoric era. And as the pillars do inhabit one designated position or another in our Lodge rooms, the inspirations which are represented by the "Pillar of fire" and the "Pillar of cloud", should teach us, as it did Moses, that although we may seem to be retracing our old footsteps, that it may appear we are only going in endless circles no matter what we do, even though our impression may be that the world is; "coming apart at the seams". And as how the Children of Israel were led through the Red Sea by a miraculous east wind, so should we ever remember that God promises to watch over us with grace and love and how He will redeem us into His own house at the end of our earthly existence.

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