

Symbolism of the Tracing Board for the 17th Degree: Knight of the East and West

We are told in the materials for this degree that it is the first of the degrees to be founded on the Mystery Religions. Keeping in mind Brother Albert Pike's assertion that symbols are often used not so much to reveal hidden knowledge as to conceal it, we can expect that the wisdom of the ancient mysteries and the major religious traditions, which we are now moving toward, will continue to be contained in the symbols of this and following degrees to an even greater extent than we have seen before. We are admonished to remember that knowledge is a rare and precious thing, and that knowledge too easily available is likely to be undervalued and lost. Thus, certain levels of knowledge are only available to Initiates, those who have proven themselves, not simply to the curious. These higher levels often contain the true doctrines and insights of the faith or tradition, while the interpretations of symbols given to "the masses" gratify those who are easily satisfied. Those who understand that in all times truth has been hidden under symbols will continue to seek further. This essay will attempt to pursue the hidden meanings of the symbolism of the tracing board for this degree.

Before I begin, I would like to share a personal aside. It is possible that this tracing board is responsible for my becoming a Freemason. When I was a boy, my father's bookcase was full of Masonic books. They were not his, as he was not a Mason, but they had belonged to his father, my grandfather, who was a 33° Mason in Denver, Colorado. I never knew my grandfather, but I loved to pull his old tomes off the shelf and look at the pictures, even before I could read. *Morals and Dogma* was a particular favorite because of the pictures that begin each essay. The symbols I found were enticing, mysterious, and even a little frightening. One thing is certain: I was drawn to them—none more so than the tracing board of the Seventeenth Degree. This childhood fascination came back to me as a junior in college when, walking the streets of downtown Lawrence, Kansas, I passed the Masonic Temple and decided to go inside to see if I could learn more about Grandpa's books. That was twenty-one years ago, and I'm still seeking.

The most succinct description of the graphic in question is found in the *Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide*: “In the center of the heptagon is the figure of a man in a long white robe, with a golden girdle round his waist, and long snow-white hair and beard. His right hand stretched out, and holding seven stars; his head encircled by an aureole, his eyes raying light, and in his mouth a two-edged sword. Around him stand seven golden candlesticks. ... On either side are the rising sun and crescent moon; and under these the basin and chafing dish” (p. 358-359).



The first question that occurs to one is, simply, where does such an intriguing symbol come from? Did Brother Pike make this up? Like so much of the imagery of the drama for this degree, the basic elements of this symbol come from the Book of Revelation. Chapter 1:13-16 says:

...and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force (New Revised Standard Version).

Because this tracing board is so complex, rather than attempting to summarize it in the usual narrative form, I find it more useful (and manageable!) to instead try to

unpack its several parts individually. The following observations will be a mixture of both my own thoughts and gleanings from my reading, which I will note.

The Heptagon and the Number Seven

The number seven appears in the tracing board in many different ways. There are seven candlesticks and seven stars; there is a rainbow over the head of the figure (see Revelation 10:1), which would have seven colors if this were a colored plate; and the border of the entire picture is a heptagon. Both inside and outside of each angle of the heptagon there is a letter, and each candlestick also has a letter. We will look at the candlesticks and stars later.

There are two versions of this tracing board, one from *Morals and Dogma*, and one from the *Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide*. Each has a different set of letters inside and outside the angles of the heptagon.

Starting at the 12:00 position, the letters found in *Morals and Dogma* are Kh, G, T, N, H, Y, M. We are taught in the literature for the degree that these stand for Hebrew characters, whose translations are rendered as *chesed*, Lovingkindness; *gevurah*, Strength; *tiferet*, Harmony; *netzach*, Victory; *hod*, Splendor; *yesud*, Foundation; and *malkut*, Kingdom. These Hebrew letters correspond to the lower seven Sephiroth the Kabbalah's Tree of Life. I could find no information about the letters inside the angles, namely, G, A, M, R, Z, Kh, Ts.

The letters shown in the *Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide* are B, D, W, P, H, G, F. A lovely explanation for this set of letters is to be found in *Albert Pike's Masonic Formulas and Rituals*: “**Beauty**, to adorn; **divinity**, which teaches us that Masonry is of Divine origin; **wisdom**, which teaches knowledge to invent; **power**, to destroy the profane, and unworthy Brethren; **honor** is a quality indispensable to support a Mason in this respectable Order; **glory** teaches us that a good Mason is the equal of the greatest prince; and **strength** [sometimes rendered as **force**] is necessary for our support” (p. 369-370).

Inside the angles of the heptagon are the letters F, U, R, D, F, P, T. The preparatory materials for the degree, as well as the *Monitor and Guide*, inform us that these stand for the same words that appear on the columns in the drama of the degree,

namely, “Union, Honor, Duty, Loyalty, Courage, Discretion, and Silence” (*Monitor*, p. 357-358). However, the initials do not correspond to those words, so this information is obviously incorrect. A bit of digging uncovered a gem of a book by William O. Peterson, called the *Masonic Quiz Book*, where we find that these letters stand for Friendship, Union, Resignation, Discretion, Fidelity, Prudence, and Temperance (p. 250).

We often hear about the significance of the number Seven. Seven planets (of the ancients), seven seals, seven churches, and so on. Masons are already familiar with many of its meanings, including the winding stairs from the Middle Chamber lecture. However, in my reading for this degree I came across something I'd never seen before—something that gives a mathematical glimpse into the fun workings of the mind of God. If you divide the first six integers by seven, the decimal that results contains the same first six numbers, repeating, *in the same order*.

$$\begin{aligned}1/7 &= .142857... \\2/7 &= .285714... \\3/7 &= .428571... \\4/7 &= .571428... \\5/7 &= .714285... \\6/7 &= .857142...\end{aligned}$$

Each of the six numbers gets to be “first”, but the order is always the same.

Man

In Western culture it seems natural, thanks in part to Michelangelo, to visualize the Supreme Being as an old man with a white beard. Indeed, Pike makes the bold assertion that “Anthropomorphism...is the indispensable condition of all human theology” (*Albert Pike’s Lecture on Masonic Symbolism and A Second Lecture on Symbolism*, p. II.110). So it would be understandable to identify the figure in the tracing board as the Great Architect. However, a close reading of the text in Revelation reveals that the author did not identify the figure as God, but rather as one “*like* the Son of Man.” This implies that it is not God, but another entity. In fact, in early forms of the degree, the *candidate* was given a beard, gold crown, and a girdle of gold, essentially dressing him as the figure in the tracing board. (*Formulas and Rituals*, p. 369). Part of the ritual contained a dialogue between the Candidate and the Senior Warden:

“**SW**: Do you know why the ancients wore white beards?”

Cand: I do not, but I presume it is known to you.

SW: They were those who came hither after passing through great trouble and affliction, and after having washed their robes in their own blood. Will you purchase such robes at so great a price?

Cand: Yes, I am willing” (*Formulas and Rituals*, p. 367-368).

This contains echoes of the current Fourteenth Degree, in which the candidate is clothed in a white robe following his lustration, having been informed that the term *candidatus* means “to be clothed in white.” Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the figure in the tracing board is supposed to represent an ideal toward which the candidate strives. This deduction is supported by two passages from the essay of this degree in *Morals and Dogma*.

First, Pike declares, “The Supreme Being is a centre of Light whose rays or emanations pervade the Universe...The world was created, not by the Supreme Being, but by a secondary agent, who is but His WORD...in which we see the occult meaning of the necessity of recovering ‘the Word’” (p. 252). The idea of a secondary agent, the Word, being the force that created the world is familiar to many. Simply put, the Great Architect had a thought, formed the thought into a Word which, when uttered, created the world. Biblically, this is found in the opening verses of the Gospel of John. As Masons, of course, we are also familiar with the quest to recover the Word.

A very powerful passage appears a few pages later when Pike asserts, “Behold, again, “THE WORD” of Masonry; the Man, on the Tracing-Board of this Degree; the LIGHT toward which all Masons travel” (p. 256). Here, it seems, Pike is saying that Man himself *is* the Word—man in his ideal sense, the type of the perfected and perfectly balanced man, i.e., Hiram Abif. The slaying of OGMHA symbolizes our imperfect state, and the search for the Word represents our attempt to attain that perfection once again. Thus, when the candidate is dressed in a white robe and golden girdle he appears as that which, as a Knight of the East and West, he should always strive to be, for “the gold, and white raiments [are]...the signs of a lofty perfection and divine purity” (*Morals and Dogma*, p. 273).

It is interesting to note that Pike’s notion of “Man” preceded Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* by eleven years, as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* was

published in 1883, *Morals and Dogma* in 1872.

Stars

The figure in the tracing board holds seven stars in his right hand, surrounding the Hebrew letter Yod. The seven stars may represent the seven classical planets of the ancients: the sun, the moon, and the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. These seven bodies were the only non-fixed objects visible in the heavens to the naked eye. Because they moved among the other stars, sometimes changing their directions, they were thought to have an influence over the lives of men. Their meanings in various esoteric schools of thought, such as Kabbalah, Alchemy, and Tarot, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Another interpretation for the seven stars is the constellation known as the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters. They are one of the most easily visible star clusters and are prominent in the northern hemisphere during the winter. When the morning star rises in the East, the seven are low in the north. In the Bible the Pleiades are mentioned in the book of Amos, in a passage reminiscent of the Creation narrative. “The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name” (5:8, NRSV). This passage neatly combines the familiar Masonic images of darkness giving way to Light and the act of lustration or purification by water.

But perhaps the most compelling argument for what the stars represent comes from the source of the entire image. Revelation 1:20 says, “As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (NRSV).

As for the Hebrew letter Yod, in the midst of the stars, it is first and foremost the first letter of the Ineffable Name of Deity, made known to Moses. In form it resembles a tongue of flame, the Divine Spark of generation, creation, and intellect. Its presence here reminds the Knight of his duties as a Perfect Elu and the lessons of the Fourteenth Degree, as it appears on the ring of that degree.

Golden Candlesticks

Around the figure stand seven golden candlesticks, and over them appear the letters E. S. P. T. S. P. L. These correspond to the Greek letters, E, Σ, Π, Θ, Σ, Φ, Λ. and, as noted above, stand for the initials of the names of the seven churches, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

In *Morals and Dogma* Pike refers to “The Seven Spirits surrounding the Throne of the Eternal, at the opening of the Grand Drama” (p. 273). The Grand Drama is the working out of the battle between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and ignorance, that is to come. The drama of this degree foreshadows that battle with the scene between John the Baptist and Herod. In addition to symbolizing the seven churches, the candlesticks offer hope that when Man becomes the Word incarnate, light will overcome the darkness.

Sun and Moon, Basin and Chafing Dish

The sun and moon serve much the same symbolic purpose as the basin and chafing dish. The sun and the chafing dish both conjure images of baptism by fire. They represent the male, active principle. Similarly, the moon and the basin full of water invoke purification by water, or lustration. They are the female, or passive and reflective element. Indeed, the moon is actually reflective, as it gives off no light of its own, but merely reflects the rays of the sun. Appearing on either side of the robed figure, they teach us that we must find balance, or equilibrium, in our lives in order to find the Word. The presence of the sun and moon bring to mind the obligations taken at the altar of Craft Freemasonry, where the sun and moon are represented by two of the burning tapers, and fire and water are represented by the echoes, in the Square and Compasses, of the alchemical symbols for those elements.

According to the *Ritual Monitor and Guide*, “the pure water is a symbol of devotion and consecration to the service of truth, justice, virtue, and benevolence,” while “the coals are a symbol of baptism with the spirit and with fire, purified by which man becomes God’s soldier, to war against fanaticism, intolerance, bigotry, falsehood. They are also a symbol of the suffering and pain, woe and want, sharp ingratitude and

bitter injustice that are God's baptism of fire" (p. 117).

In conclusion, I would offer that the tracing board of the Seventeenth Degree offers us hope. We are told in the course materials for this degree that there is no good and evil, but only the serene working out of the will of God. Part of that "working out" is the search we all undertake to find the Lost Word within ourselves. This image, with all its esoteric elements, gives us clues as to how that work may be done, if we are thoughtful enough to decipher them. There are several references to the lessons of the first three degrees of Craft Masonry, including the rainbow of seven colors, which calls to mind the seven liberal arts and sciences of the Second Degree. (The fifth science is Geometry and the fifth color is blue.) The sun and moon remind us of the lessons of the Blue Lodge and the need to find balance in our lives. The sword in the mouth of the figure calls to mind both the Tyler's sword, guarding our thoughts, words, and actions, as well as the sword used by Masons to fight superstition, ignorance, and fanaticism.

Though there are dark clouds in the background, the pure white of the figure and the light emanating from the crown dispel them. As we search for and follow the Inner Light, we too become "like the Son of Man," full of love for both mankind and his Creator. One might say that Man *is* the spark in the right hand of the robed figure—a lesser version of the great creative fire of God. It remains to us to encourage yet control that fire within us.