

FREE MASONRY 4

THE OLD MANUSCRIPTS AND TRADITIONS

The birthplace of Free Masonry as an Operative Craft has not been found, like all other prehistoric transactions, buried in the gloom of obscurity in the dim and shadowy past. Several theories have been advanced as to its origin, but in the absence of documentary evidence these conjectures are of little value.

About sixty old manuscripts have been found dating from the 14th Century to the 18th Century. These are regarded by some as veritable Masonic history. Other Masonic writers disagree and go so far as to say that they are mythical, fabulous and not to be relied upon.

These old documents are said to have been written by the Benedictine Monks, who were the custodians of all learning up to the 16th century, and were copied by them from older documents.

The legendary Regius Poem is thought to be the oldest. This is called the Hallowel Manuscript, as it was found in the British Museum by Mr. Hallowel. It is supposed to be of the date 1390, copied from an original of an earlier date which was burned at York in the War of the Roses, 1456.

This and other old manuscripts are called the Old Charges of Free Masons, which were recited or read to the initiates. They contain a history of the Craft, religious instruction, Tenets of the Roman Church, and an account of the Assembly of Masons at York in 926, called by King Athelstan.

From these, Masonic writers have set up theories as to the origin of Free Masonry. Dr. Anderson said he thought that Masonry began with Adam; others with the sons of Lamech, and taught to the Egyptians by Abraham, who had Euclid for a scholar. Quite a number of the English Masonic writers claim that it was brought to Britain by the Roman legions in the first century, when they conquered England; others think that it had its origin at the building of Solomon's Temple; some claim that Moses taught Masonry to the Israelites in the Wilderness; others say that it had its origin in Egypt.

The idea that Masonry began with Adam is far-fetched. If it did, his eldest son was a poor example, as Cain was a murderer.

The conjecture that it began with the sons of Lamech is quite lame. Jabel was a herdsman, Jubal a musician, and Tubal-Cain, a blacksmith. None of them were builders.

The story of Abraham teaching the Egyptians how to build is a strange fancy. The Pyramids were hoary with age before Abraham was born.

There is not a particle of evidence that Solomon was a Mason builder.

The same is true of Zerubbabel. Moses built nothing material except a tent of the skins of animals, with some linen for its divisions.

In my humble opinion, the borrowing of symbolism from the Bible story of the Hebrews of the days of Moses, Solomon and Zerubbabel and from the erection of cities, temples and pyramids of the Ancients is erroneously regarded as Masonic history.

That organized corporations of craftsmen came to England with the Roman army in the first century A.D. is generally accepted yet these old manuscripts do not refer to them, but are of a purely Christian character. The first charge in them to the initiate is to be true to the church.

The oldest trace of the title, "Free Mason," is found in a statute made in the reign of Edward I, in 1350, and the oldest minute is that of Edinburgh Lodge, in 1599, so that the story of Ancient Craft Masonry in the early centuries of the Christian Era is quite obscure.

These old charges show no evidence of signs, tokens and words or of a book. It is only after the Great Reformation of religion that we can find in the old traditions of Ancient Free Masonry any reference to the Bible.

Previous to that, Free Masonry was the creature of the Church, and controlled almost entirely by the Monks.

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Published in Vancouver, B.C.; 1934.

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