

# The Masonic Apron

Eugene W. Wiggins

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Masonry is not a religion, but all of us recognize that our ritual and teachings are based on events described in the Holy Bible. Jesus of Nazareth, the principal character in the New Testament brought a new philosophy to the Hebrews, and even those who fail to recognize Him as Savior and Lord must agree that everyone who lives by His teachings must be a better man for it, and the World a better place in which to live. Jesus was very firm in His presentations. In talking about the scribes and Pharisees, He said: "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, THAT observe and do; but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not." (Matthew 23:3) In speaking to the scribes and Pharisees, He said: "Even so ye also appear outwardly righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:28) In Mark 8:37, He says "or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

After Jesus was betrayed and falsely accused, He stood before the governor who asked Him: "Art Thou the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. And when He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto Him, Hearest Thou not how many things they witness against thee? And He answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marveled greatly." (Matthew 27:11,12,13,14) Although Jesus was crucified for His good works, He stood steadfast when confronted with his enemies and accusers. For two thousand years, his name has

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stood for goodness and mercy, and his place in history is forever assured. The name of His betrayer (Judas) has ever been a name of derision.

Masonry is also a philosophy of life and is illustrated by symbols and emblems. In the Entered Apprentice's Charge we hear, "In your outward demeanor, be particularly careful to avoid censure or reproach. You are not to suffer your zeal for the Institution to lead you into argument with those who, through ignorance, may ridicule it." In the Master Mason Lecture we are told, "The Book of Constitutions guarded by the Tiler's sword reminds us that we should ever be watchful and guarded in our words and actions, particularly when before the enemies of Masonry; ever bearing in remembrance those truly Masonic virtues, silence and circumspection." In the Charge we are admonished, "To preserve the reputation of the fraternity unsullied must be your constant care . . . and by the regularity of your own behavior, afford the best example for the conduct of others less informed. Your virtue, honor, and reputation are concerned in supporting with dignity the character you now bear. Let no motive, therefore, make you swerve from your duty, violate your vows, or betray your trust; but be true and faithful, and imitate the example of that celebrated Artist whom you this evening represent. Thus you will render yourself deserving of the honor which we have conferred, and merit the confidence we have reposed."

The apron is the first gift presented to a Mason, and the presentation is followed by the first Masonic knowledge imparted to him. the word apron comes from the French napron which was described as a defense against injury, for cleanliness, safety, or to cover shame. The first reference I could find to the word apron is in the Holy Bible, Genesis, second and third chapters: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it . . . and when the woman saw that the tree was good

for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." Interestingly, the Geneva Bible (1560), used by Masons before 1717 A.D. uses the word breeches instead of aprons and is commonly known as the "breeches or britches" Bible.

Mackey tells us that the apron or some equivalent mode of investiture was common to all nations of the earth as a mystic symbol from the earliest periods. The Israelites used a girdle in the investiture of their priests. In the Mysteries of Mithras, in Persia, the candidate was invested with a white apron. Doctor Oliver (Signs and Symbols of Freemasonry) says that the apron appears to have been, in ancient times, an honorary badge of distinction. In Israel, none but the superior orders of priesthood were permitted to adorn themselves with ornamented girdles, which were made of blue, purple, and crimson, decorated with gold upon a ground of fine white linen; while inferior priests wore plain white. It appears in all ages to have been a most exalted badge of distinction.

We are familiar with many uses of the apron. The blacksmith wears a long, leather apron to protect himself from the sparks and heat when hammering hot metal. The butcher or chef uses a long white apron to protect his clothes from stains; the stonemason wears a long, usually leather or heavy cloth apron to protect his clothes from wear, and the little apron worn by French maids is to identify them as servants, certainly not protect them from household chores. One of the most interesting uses of an apron to me was when I went into a salt mine in Germany. They dressed the men in a baggy black suit with a white fez, then put a heavy leather apron on the backside which was tied in front. We entered the mine shaft near the base of a mountain and slid down a long, highly polished wooden slide into the mine. The resultant heat was such that touching the apron would blister the bare hands.

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Let us study the operative Mason's apron. The body shows four right angles, forming a square, symbolizing matter. The bib, as it is called in operative masonry, forms an equilateral triangle, the symbol of spirit. When the flap is dropped, it represents the descent of spirit into matter, the soul to the body. In operative masonry, the apex of the triangle was laced or buttoned to the vest, depending upon the period. In time, this was altered so that the apex of the triangle was cut away, while the strings, which were long enough to go around the body and finish at the front, were tied there. One writer believes that the strings hanging down with frayed edges, may have their representation in the tassels of our Master Mason's Aprons.

We have no proof that ancient operative masons attached any spiritual significance to the apron, but Hugh Miller (*Schools and Schoolmasters*) reports a custom of "Washing the Apron" among operative masons in early times. The apprentice was seldom allowed to touch a stone with tools. He was mostly a cleanup man and gofer. When he was finally permitted to block out a bit of rubble or rough ashlar, and shaped it well, and was allowed to proceed with the polishing of the stone; he was permitted, for the first time, to wear his apron. His apron was white, for in the day, it was unwritten law that every craftsman started his week's work with a clean, white apron. There was a time in Scotland when the weekly washing of the apron was accompanied by liquid refreshment to clear their throats of the stone dust. This was overdone by a few, and the serious-minded journeymen were obliged to lecture the young craftsmen about the importance of the craft and the behavior expected of their profession. The white apron was used to make the point that while the apron must be kept as white as possible, so should the reputation of the craft. Hewers and polishers normally wore cloth aprons to protect from the dust, but skin aprons were used by the craftsman who had to fix or build the stone. "Early speculative Masons used the same full-sized apron as operative masons, but with the formation of the Grand Lodge of England, some objected, saying it made them look like mechanics, so a standard was adopted: "The color of a Freemason's apron should be

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pure unspotted white. A Freemason's apron must be made of lambskin. (No other substance such as linen, silk or satin could be substituted.)"

Here again, we have a Biblical reference for the choice of material: Proverbs 27:26 states: "The lambs are for thy clothing, and the goats are the price of the field." The true apron of a Freemason must, then, be of pure unspotted lambskin, from fourteen to sixteen inches wide, from twelve to fourteen inches deep, square at the bottom, and without device or ornament of any kind.

In the United States, we have deviated from the original definition by adding a border of blue for the Craft Lodge, red for the Royal Arch, and other colors for the various and sundry branches of Masonry. We have added emblematic officer jewels and various other decorations to identify officers and past officers. Our English brethren blame the French for these innovations, but a look at the various paintings and drawings of the 1700s proves that the English have a propensity for decoration. The Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of England prescribe the following for the Grand Master: "The apron of the Grand Master is ornamented with the blazing sun embroidered in gold in the centre; on the edging the pomegranate and lotus with the seven-eared wheat at each corner, and also on the fall; all in gold embroidery; the fringe in gold bullion."

The most memorable moment of my entering, passing, and raising under the Grand Lodge of the Philippines came when the Worshipful Master rose and said:

I now take pleasure in presenting you this lambskin or white leather apron. It is an emblem of innocence and the BADGE of a Mason. More ancient than the Golden Fleece or the Roman Eagle, more honorable than the Star and Garter, or any distinction that can be conferred upon you, at this, or any future period, by King,

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Prince, Potentate or any other person. It may be that in the coming years, upon your head shall rest the laurel wreath of victory, upon your breast may hang jewels fit to grace the diadem of an eastern potentate; nay more than these, with light added to the coming light, your ambitious feet may tread round after round the ladder that leads to fame in our mystic circle and even the purple of the fraternity may rest upon your honored shoulders. But never again until your enfranchised spirit shall have passed upward and inward through the pearly gates, shall any honor so distinguished, so emblematical of purity and all perfections, be bestowed upon you as this which I now confer. It is yours – your name is written upon it – yours to wear throughout an honorable life, and, at your death, to be placed upon the coffin which shall contain your earthly remains and with them, laid beneath the silent clods of the valley. Let its pure spotless surface be to you an ever-present reminder of an emblematical or unblemished purity of life and rectitude of conduct, a never-ending argument for nobler deeds, for higher thoughts, for purer actions, and for greater achievements. And when at last your weary feet shall have come to the end of their toilsome journey, and from \_ your nerveless grasp shall drop forever the working tools of life, may the record of your life and actions be as pure and spotless as this fair emblem which I now place in your hands. And when your trembling soul shall stand naked and alone before the Great White Throne, there to receive judgement for the deeds done while in the body, may it be your portion to hear from Him who sitteth as the Judge Supreme, the welcome words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." It is hoped, my brother, that you will wear that apron with pleasure to yourself and honor to the Fraternity.

In the lecture of the Entered Apprentice in Virginia, we hear: "The lamb has in all ages been deemed an emblem of innocence; he, therefore, who wears the Lamb-skin or White Leather Apron as the badge of a Free and Accepted Mason is thereby reminded of that

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purity of life and conduct which is so essentially necessary to his gaining admittance into the Celestial Lodge above, where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides."

In the funeral service, we publicly state that: "This Lamb-Skin or White Leather Apron is an emblem of Innocence, and the time-honored badge of a Free and Accepted Mason – more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle; more honorable than the Star and Garter, when worthily worn. This emblem I now deposit with the body of our deceased brother. By it we are reminded that through the universal dominion of death our brother has finished his earthly labor, and that his account now rests with his God."

About two weeks ago, a prominent local television personality, speaking to a group of officers at Langley Air Force Base made the statement that "A Shriner is a drunken Mason." What an affront to the Masons in attendance! On second thought, how did he come to this conclusion?

Masons are responsible for the public image of Freemasonry, yet we read about a Past Grand Master and Grand Treasurer who embezzled one third of a million dollars from the Grand Lodge; of a prominent Mason and politician who gave his Masonic ring to an exotic dancer, and in a drunken stupor, brought public attention to himself when she jumped or was thrown into a pool in our Nation's Capital; Anyone who attended the Oyster Bowl Game can see why Masons are thought to be drunks, not all, of course, but that is the public perception. There is no doubt that the fund raising of the Shrine is for one of the greatest and most noble purposes we could imagine, but it receives less publicity than the acts of a few of its members; All of us are aware that raffles are forbidden by Masonic Law. I wouldn't attempt to cite the examples of Masons and Lodges who violate this law to raise money for various purposes.

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Let each of us take a look at our apron. If it needs washing, let's do so in private or within the body of a lodge. Our only response to our detractors should be to keep our apron spotless. Even so, we can expect criticism from the profane and uninformed. Even Jesus faced that problem.

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