

The Three Great Lights

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There are a few preliminaries in opening a Master Mason's Lodge, but the Master's Lodge is not officially one until after the Three Great Lights are displayed. For some unknown reason the name Furniture or Furnishings is given to the Three Great Lights which are the Holy Bible, the Square and Compasses along with the Charter from the Grand Lodge. Have you ever asked why the Square and Compasses are placed on the open Bible as they are? How wide should the Compasses points be open? We shall try to answer these questions.

The Square and Compasses are emblems of the Craft of Freemasonry. In ordinary usage, compasses is more usual, that being a singular noun in the plural form, like scissors, shears, and pliers. As an Entered Apprentice you beheld the Square covering the two points of the Compasses. It was taken as a symbol of the earth, to the physical, the material and sensual. You were symbolically in a crude, natural state and your divine life covered and ruled by earthly nature. Thus the candidate observes the dominance of the Square, it symbolizing that in his present condition he is in a state of darkness. When the candidate takes his Fellow Craft Degree he has made one step toward liberty and light.

He views the Square and Compasses are interplaced, that is, one point of the Compasses lay on top of the Square and this is to show to an extent that he has received Masonic Light; that the low material and sensual have, in some measure, come under the influence and dominion of the higher and spiritual. Then when he advances to the Master Mason's

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Degree he sees the Compasses dominate the Square, both points of the Compasses lay on top of the square. This is to indicate that he has, or should have received Masonic Light in full; that Divine help within him has subjugated the earthly; that he is a Master Mason; the absolute master of himself, of his appetites, passions and proneness to evil.

He learns that as the Compasses are made use of in crafting the orbits or the Heavenly Bodies, so must he make use of them in designing the Dome of his Temple Eternal. "Thus if the Lodge is an oblong square and built upon the Square, over it arches the sky, which is a circle." Thus Earth and Heaven are brought together in the Lodge -- the earth where man goes forth to his labor, and the heaven to which he aspires." As an Apprentice and Fellow Craft he was engaged in drawing straight lines and angles. Now in Master Mason's Degree he must direct his thoughts to the Great Circle of God's Providence.

In Masonic symbolism the Square and Compasses refer to the Freemason's duty to the Craft and to himself; hence it is properly a symbol of brotherhood, and there significantly adopted in the badge or token of the Fraternity. In ancient symbolism the Square symbolized what is earthly and material while the Compasses signified the heavenly and the spiritual. The Compass is perhaps the most spiritual of all the working tools; it is found everywhere in the Craft of Masonry and is also in many degrees. Along with the Square they together are the universal emblematic devise of Craft Masonry. They are the basis also of all Masonic moralization.

It is an anomaly and an inconsistency to speak of a "perfect circle." If it is a circle it will of necessity be at the same time and instant perfect. In like manner if a thing is said to be "perfect" it cannot be less or more so. It cannot be made "more perfect." It has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the Compasses are a symbol of the equilateral triangle, which in turn is a symbol of Deity; Inverted, the symbol of spiritual man and

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likewise of the spirit in general. The Compasses then represent the Deity, the Divine, the Supreme Architect and as such God continues to rule His creation and in perfect order. The Psalmist has said in Psalm 19:

The heavens tell out the glory of God
The vault of heaven reveals His handiwork.

There have been Masonic writers who declare the Compasses should be opened at an angle of 60 degrees. Their reasoning involves geometric calculations that lead to producing an equilateral triangle, a figure that has always been sacred and even considered by some a representative of the Deity. However, for reasons shown hereafter and with the Deity afforded the greatest consideration, and also since there has never been any official Masonic regulation governing the angle of the Compasses as one of the Three Great Lights, it is believed that there are better reasons for holding that the Compasses should be at an angle of 47 degrees as it rests on the Sacred Word as one of the Three Great Lights.

In ancient symbolism the Square signified the earth, while the circle, a figure produced with the Compasses, signified the sun or the heavens. Also, we learn that those brethren who delight to trace our emblems to an astronomical origin, find in the Compasses a symbol of the sun, the circular pivot representing the body of the luminary, and the diverging legs his rays.

The Compass, therefore, as the symbol of the Heavens, represents the Spiritual, Intellectual, and Moral portion of this double nature of Humanity, the Square, as the symbol of the earth, its material, sensual, and baser portion. -- Albert Pike

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The sun, obedient to the all-seeing eye is an emblem of the ritual of the third degree, and the sun displayed within an extended Compass constitutes the jewel of the Past Master. Within the great circle of God's Divine Laws the sun is represented as that light which gives to man the light of his day. God has fixed the sun in such a position that it can be thought of as the very top of the Compasses with the two points on the earth and the diverging legs the sun's rays. God fixed the limits of the direct rays of the sun to proclaim the seasons of the year.

As the world turns on its axis the northern hemisphere tilts or inclines towards the sun never more than $23\frac{1}{2}$ degrees so that the direct rays shine on an imaginary line called the Tropic of Cancer on or about 21-22 June. This we call the Summer Solstice and designate as the beginning of our summer. Then for the next three months the earth "straightens up" and on 22 September the direct rays of the sun are on the Equator giving us equal day and night. This we call the Autumnal Equinox. Further tilting away from the sun in the northern hemisphere allows the sun to shine directly on the Tropic of Capricorn which is $23\frac{1}{2}$ degrees below the Equator on 21-22 December making for us the beginning of winter and called the Winter Solstice. For those persons living in South America this date is for them the beginning of their summer.

From this date forward and as the world tilts back to the upright position the sun's rays gradually approach the Equator on or about 21-22 March giving us the Vernal Equinox and the beginning of spring. But God has fixed the extent of the sun's travels as its direct rays shine on the earth at twice $23\frac{1}{2}$ degrees or a total of 47 degrees as the total extent of the angle. It is for this reason that as the Compasses lay astride the Square on the Holy Bible they should always be at an angle of exactly 47 degrees. It is to remind us that God has fixed the limits of the sun's travels to extend between the two parallel Tropics that are 47 degrees apart as He has fixed all other heavenly bodies and Yea! all creation including man.

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This needs repeating. The limits of the sun's extreme northern and southern declination, when he arrives at the solstitial points of Cancer and Capricorn is a span of exactly 47 degree. You will note these days when the sun reaches these points are respectively the 21st of June and the 22nd of December, and this will account for their subsequent application to the two Saints John, whose anniversaries have been placed by the church near those dates.

Hence are the Compasses the most prominent emblem of virtue, and true and only measure of a Mason's life and conduct. As the Bible gives us light on our duties to God, and the Square illustrates our duties to our neighbors and brothers, so the Compasses give that additional light which is to instruct us in the duty we owe to ourselves -- the great imperative duty of circumscribing our passions, and keeping our desires within due bounds.

The Square and Compasses were the device or sign or emblem which stood for the Craft or architecture, or Freemasonry. It even appears in churches and cathedrals in "The Mason's window." As used on the altar in their capacity of Great Lights, along with the Volume of the Law, the Holy Bible, they are therefore not used in their capacity of Working Tools (or, rather, of working instruments) but as an emblem of the Craft of Freemasonry. The two symbols have been long and universally combined - to teach us, as says an early ritual, "To square our actions and to keep them within due bounds" and are so seldom seen apart, but are so kept together; either as Two Great Lights, or as a jewel worn once by the Master of a Lodge, now by the Past Master - that they have come at last to be recognized as the symbol of Freemasonry so long and so universally accepted even by the profane world as the peculiar characteristic of Freemasonry, that it has been made in the United States the subject of legal decision.

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A manufacturer of flour having made, in 1873, an application to the Patent Office for permission to adopt the Square and Compasses as a trademark, the Commissioner of Patents, Mr. J. M. Thacher, refused the permission on the ground that the mark was a Masonic Symbol and was universally accepted as such.

Several years ago I attended an estate sale and purchased a picture. The picture showed the entire Cannongate-Killwinning Edinburgh Lodge in session. The year was 1787 and the Master was shown in the act of conferring the sash of Poet Laureate on Bobby Burns. I have examined this picture carefully and I find at least three Square and Compasses. Note that the date of the picture is 1787, the year of our United States Constitution. (*Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Mackey, revised 1912; pages 156-157).

To complete the discussion a word should be said regarding the letter "G" which is often found suspended over the chair of the Worshipful Master; it is therefore a Masonic Symbol. The letter "G" alludes to geometry, sometimes called the fifth science. One author describes it as the "one Great Symbol." It stands for geometry, not geometry in general, or in the large, or in the abstract, but Geometry as used by Freemasons, as they have come to know and to understand it in their centuries of work. It is there for all to see, symbolizing the faith and fellowship one enjoys while the Lodge is open. Geometry is considered the "thought form" of God in nature. It does reveal to us many of the beauties created by the Supreme Architect. So it comes as no surprise to you to learn that "G" is also the initial of the sacred name of Deity in many languages of the world, God is frequently call the Great Architect of the Universe. Masons walk in His presence constantly. Therefore it is impossible not to feel a little closes to Him in the Lodge with the letter "G" ever shining in the East or to associate Him with the letter when we see it on the Masonic Emblem of the Square and Compasses.

It may come as a surprise to learn that no representation of the letter "G" combined with the Square and Compasses has been found before 1850. Nor is there any record that the letter "G" within the Square and Compasses being officially approved by any Grand Lodge. It is believed that the letter "G" was added by some jeweler in making a badge or pin and the idea quickly took hold and became very popular. Nowhere in the picture of Cannongate-Killwinning Edinburgh Lodge did I find the Square and Compasses with the letter "G" in the center. With symbols as with rituals, Masons have not been very discriminating, analytical, or logical but are prone to accept much without question. Some Masonic writers hold that the letter "G" is a suspended symbol and should stand alone. It is not subordinated to or surrounded by anything else according to these Masonic writers. The only official Masonic Symbol of Square and Compasses with anything in the center is that symbol with the Blazing Star or Sun in the center.

All Master Masons would be well advised to think of the Three Great Lights and what they represent. The Holy Bible, a guide for our lives in all circumstances; the Square an emblem to square our actions and keep them within due bound, and the compasses set at 47 degrees to remind us that God's creation is eternal and continues to operate in perfect order.

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