

## CHAPTER XIII

### Square & Compasses at the Altar

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In contemplating the history of usage of symbols in our Craft, if one were to distill the symology of Freemasonry to one set of symbols perhaps the position of the Square and Compasses at our Altar nearly best describes our reason for Freemasonry, and for our being on the Earth in the first place.

Go ahead and pull out your 'ritual' and read what it says about the position of the Square and Compasses on our altar.

At the Installation of the Officers of the Lodge, the following is said, exoterically, of the Square and Compasses:

The **Square teaches us** to regulate our actions by rule and line and to harmonize our conduct by the principles of morality and virtue. The **Compasses teach us** to limit our desires in every station, that, rising to eminence by merit, we may live respected, and die regretted.

On being brought to Light in the Third Degree, for example, our 'ritual' relates:

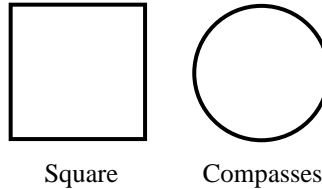
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“ . . . on being brought to light in this degree, you behold the Great Lights in Masonry, as in the preceding degree, with this difference: both points of the compasses are above the square, **which it to teach you that** you have received, and are entitled to receive, all the light that can be conferred upon or communicated to you in a Master Mason Lodge.”

I remember when I first heard that it was sort of like the Peggy Lee song where she sang: “If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball . . .” But we are also in our degrees enjoined to seek ‘more’ and ‘further’ Light [in the Great Light], for the truth therein we may find and as which therein may find it.’ One must be aware by now, that when our ‘ritual’ says **which it to teach you that** it is stating such exoterically but that if one were to search ‘more’ and ‘further’ then a more ‘esoteric teaching’ could be revealed.

There is very little written by our Grand Lodge on what the symbols of our Craft 'mean,' other than what may be found in our Standard Work and Lectures [SW&L], or our 'ritual.' But by an odd coincidence there is one such work "prepared for use of New York State Lodges and their members by the Grand Lodge Library, under the supervision of the Board of General Activities of the Grand Lodge of New York, F&AM," in 1929. It is a little booklet of 61 pages under the title of *One Hundred Symbols in Freemasonry*.

I was contemplating why we were here on Earth and the Square and Compasses at the Altar recently and my inner being related to me that the Square is symbolic of the mortal [earthen] man and the Compasses of his spiritual or Divine / Immortal nature. And that our journey through Freemasonry and here on Earth is a journey of learning to balance our mortal man with that of our Divine Man.



In searching more and further, my inner being referred me to the above noted 'little booklet,' where on page 53 I found:

#### SQUARE

... As one of the Great Lights the square is a symbol of the earth, the earthly, the physical and material, and all the passions and appetites appertaining thereto, which in his progress towards becoming a real Master Mason the initiate must learn to subordinate to the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual in his nature, typified by the Compasses, another of the Great Lights.

And on page 21 I found:

#### COMPASSES

... as a Great Light they represent the heavens, which means the moral and spiritual, and as such teach how necessary it is that the conscience and the intelligence should dominate the physical in a man's life.

A bit simplistic in its wording, but very powerful in its reality.

One thing to consider would be that no one would be a Master Mason if the preceding degrees had not been received by a Brother [except those made 'at sight']. So a Master Mason is more in reality a 'conglomerate' of all three Degrees viewed as a Unity. And just because because one point of the compasses was revealed in the FC degree and both points in the MM degree, one may reflect upon how many of us are still in the EA mode with the square still covering both points of the compasses in terms of how much of our mortal being have we balanced with our Divine Being.

If man were merely mortal, with no Divine 'part' to him he would be little more than an animal. If man did not have free will and immortality, there would be little reason for his being on earth and for the evolution we have experienced since our advent here.

How could one go about balancing their mortal [earthen] being with their Spiritual Divine Being?

One of our first steps in Freemasonry is when we enter the Preparation Room, where, symbolically our earthen shell is removed from us, along with our belongings and 'metallic substances.' We are then clothed in a white 'spiritual' symbol of our pending [divine] journey through life.

<http://burningtaper.blogspot.com/2007/09/albert-pikes-compasses-and-square.html>

### Albert Pike's 'Compasses and Square'

Brother Tubalcain of the blog [Tubalcain420](http://Tubalcain420) recently posted the following essay from Bro. Albert Pike's *Esoterika* which discusses the Compasses and the Square as Masonic and Hermetic symbols. May you find light in these words.

## The Compasses and Square

What is there in these implements that entitle them to be regarded with reverence as two of the three Great Lights of the Lodge? What do they really mean? And what is the meaning of the different relative positions of the points of the compasses and the square in the three Degrees? Are these meanings in any way connected with the saying that "the principal tenets of Freemasonry are included between the two points of the compasses?"

The earnest inquirer after truth, the student of Masonic symbolism, does not want ingenious explanations, worked out by the intellect of anyone. What he wants to know is whether these two symbols had any definite and fixed meaning when they became part of the inheritance of Freemasonry; and if they had what their real meanings were. He wants certainty, and not guessing, conjectures or speculations.

I inquired, some years since, of an eminent English Masonic scholar and antiquarian, Bro :. William James Hughan, whether the compasses and square were used on the altar in the same positions, in England, as among us, and since what time had they been so used; desiring to be sure that their use was not a novelty introduced in this Country.

He replied, "I cannot say how long it has been the custom as to the points of the square and compasses in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Degrees. I am inclined to consider it an old one, as it is general."

In a Lodge of the French Rite, when the Senior Warden is asked, "Are you a Master Mason?" his answer is, "I am; I have passed from the square to the compasses." [see note at end of this present text]

The square is an instrument that can be applied to level surfaces and rectilinear angles only. The earth anciently was supposed to be a level, with occasional inequalities of hills and valleys. For many practical purposes it is regarded as level now. In the ordinary operations of surveying it is so treated, its spherical shape not being regarded. The surveys of the public lands of the United States are so made; and consequently the lines of adjoining surveys never coincide.

**The compasses are used to describe circles**, and in spherical trigonometry in which the square cannot be used. **They are therefore a fit symbol of the sky, the heavens**, which form as it were, the roof of a half-sphere, in crossing which the heavenly bodies appear to describe arcs of circles; **and the square is a fit symbol of the Earth.**

In the copy of an engraving which is upon the first page of this essay these two symbols appear. It is taken from a Hermetic work in Latin by Basilius Valentinus, published in 1613. In it you see a naked human body with two heads, one male and the other female, one with the right and the other with the left arm extended. Over the male head is the astronomical sign that denotes the sun, and over the female that which denotes the moon, and between and above these signs is that which denotes the planet Mercury. In the hand which is on the male side is a pair of compasses; and in the hand on the female side is the square. These symbols, as you see, were engraved and published over a hundred years before what is called the "revival" of Masonry, in 1717, and they had been in use and had a settled meaning for hundreds of years before Valentinus published them.

We know with absolute certainty what their signification was to the Hermetic philosophers who used them. It is not a matter of conjecture or speculation but of absolute certainty of knowledge. The figure with one body and two heads represented the generative or creative power of the Deity and the productive capacity of nature. The generative power had its abiding place in the sky. Light is the great generative agent. The productive power is in the flat earth.

Every human being is of a compound and double nature, animal and material in part; and in part intellectual and spiritual. His body is said to have been formed of the dust of the earth: his soul, spirit, intellect are of another nature. One is earthly, the other heavenly, one material, the other spiritual.

**The compasses, which are a fit symbol of the heavens, are also a fit symbol of all that is heavenly and spiritual; the square which is a fit symbol of the earth is also a fit symbol of all that is earthly and material, in nature and man.**

In every human being that lives, there are four forces, each always acting, and two of them apparently antagonistic to the other two. Two of these belong to the animal, earthly, material nature of man, the animal or sensual appetites and the passions. Both of these, man has in common with the animals; and so far as these rule him, he is but an animal. The other two belong to his intellectual and spiritual nature. One of them is the Moral Sense, whose conclusions are as absolute and infallible as those of the mathematics; by means of which Moral Sense, given in a greater or less degree to every man, he knows what is right and what is wrong for him to do. How little so ever of any moral code may control the conduct of an Indian wholly uncivilized, his Moral Sense teaches him something, at

least this, that if a thing is placed in his hands to deliver to another, and he promises to deliver it, it is not right but wrong to fail to deliver it and appropriate it to his own use.

The other is the Reason, which reaches man what is the wisest and best for him to do for his own good, and this also belongs in a greater or less degree to every man.



*From a Hermetic book in Latin,  
its author, Basilus Valentinus, published in 1613.<sup>1</sup>*

These do not result from the combination of the atoms of matter in our bodies, It is a sufficient argument with which to refute those who think they believe that there is no God, that it is simply impossible, that the Moral Sense could originate in or be produced by any combination of material atoms, or by the action and counter action of any conceivable forces of matter. To create a moral law or a single tenet of it, there must be a superior Will to enact it; and that Will must enact it in obedience to the unerring conclusions of an infinite wisdom.

It is the Reason, by the analogies perceived and formulated whereby we attain by observation of phenomena, a knowledge of causes; and so have precisely the same kind of knowledge of the Infinite Will, Wisdom, Power and Beneficence, which reveals Itself to us in nature and in ourselves, as we have of electricity; of which in its essence we know nothing; but from its effects we attain such knowledge as is attainable by us, of what is.

The Moral Sense and the Reason come to us, as it was anciently said, "from above"; the sensual appetites and animal passions, anger, revenge, hate, jealousy, envy and the like, "from below." But they are not, as was once believed, implanted in us by the devil. They also are

gifts and endowments which we receive from the Infinite Wisdom. For to them, are in a great measure, owing the heroism and endurance of human nature. They are the springs of human action and of human exertion, and without them no man could be great. It is by the potent action and counteraction of these opposite forces, the appetites and passions always acting in striving to overcome, but controlled by an undue subordination to the other forces, that true greatness is achieved. They are not evil and devilish, to be extirpated and mortified; for most of the great deeds which men have done in the world have owed their doing to these springs of action. Harmony everywhere consists in equilibrium, and equilibrium is the result of the alternating preponderance of opposing forces. The astronomers have been forced to suppose a centripetal and a centrifugal force, each the opposite and antagonist of the other, one drawing the planet towards the sun, and the other causing it to strive to dart away from it, the line of action of both be in one straight line in opposite directions, to explain the movement of the planet round the sun in its elliptical orbit.

When the candidate is prepared to be initiated, he represents man in the state of barbarism, ignorance and subjugation. He is neither naked nor clothed, barefoot nor shod; meaning that his faculties are but half developed, and that the Moral Sense and reason, though they exist in him are in a dormant condition, He is hoodwinked, and so deprived of light, symbol of his supposed deprivation of the light of knowledge and the obscuration of his intellect; and he is further symbolically deprived of the light of reason and knowledge of himself, of nature and of God, by being deprived of all articles made of the precious metals, gold and silver.

For gold was among all the old nations, the metal of the sun, and silver that of the moon. The same words meant "gold" and "sunlight" because the sun in rising flooded the east with gold; and the same words in more than One language meant "silver" and "the moon." The light of the sun symbolized the direct light of revelation coming from The Deity into the soul and enlightening it. The light of the moon, which is the reflected light of the sun, symbolized the shining into one soul of the light from another, the light of revelation reflected from one intellect into another and illuminating and enlightening it.

And his preparation was completed in the cable-tow around his neck.

We may compare him in this condition to, and consider him, representation of the vast masses of the common people of the ancient ages, say of the Egyptian toilers, a huge hoard of slaves, under the pharaohs, with no knowledge of nature or the causes of things, except what they gained through the senses, with not even a glimmering idea of one God or a divine providence, of a hereafter, or of anything for themselves after the end of their poor

miserable life; denied knowledge by the priests, because the possession of it by them would make them dangerous; worshipping the sacred bull, the ibis, the scarabaeus, idols grotesque and hideous; slaves of their kings, to whom their lives were no more than the lives of insects; their reason dormant, their Moral Sense inactive; and in their appetites and passions, mere animals.

We may regard him as of a somewhat higher nature, a Saxon like Gurth born-thrall of Cedric the Saxon, or one of the peasantry of France in the days of Henry the Fourth; for he represents every man and every people in which the sensual appetites and animal passions have ruled with a dominion uncontrolled by the Moral Sense and the Reason.

**When he is brought to light his attention is directed to the compasses and the square on the altar, and he is made to note that both points of the compasses are under the square.** He is about to begin his journey from the west to the east in search of light, which is to "make progress in Masonry," and he is to labor three years as an Apprentice before he can become a Fellow of the Craft.

The two points of the compasses symbolize his Moral Sense and Reason, and the two arms of the square, essential appetites and animal passions: and the two points of the compasses are under the square because in him as a candidate for initiation and deprived of light, the Moral Sense and Reason are supposed to be overpowered and subjugated by his appetites and passions, which belong to his animal nature. He is now to begin to "make progress in Masonry."

**When he becomes a Fellowcraft, he sees one point of the compasses above the square and one below it:** which is to teach him that he is supposed, by zealous endeavors to attain the Lights to have attained at that moral and intellectual condition, in which his appetites and passions no longer have the entire habitual mastery over his Moral Sense and Reason, but these have become so strengthened and developed by his labors as an Apprentice as to be enabled sometimes and in some degree to hold their ground against the former and even overcome and control them.

**And when he becomes a Master Mason, he sees both points of the compasses above the square;** which is to teach him that he is supposed to have attained that condition in which the moral, intellectual and spiritual forces of his nature have become superior to its material and animal forces and energies, his Moral Sense and Reason have the habitual mastery over his appetites and passions, **the divine in him transcends the human, and there is in him that equilibrium of the forces of his nature** which constitutes excellence and entitles him to honor.

The habitual mastery-not never-failing, never-interrupted mastery, of his appetites and passions; for that is the condition to which no man attains or can attain in this life.

He is at last a "Master Mason," because, and only because, he has become Master of himself. If he is not so, he deceives his fellows; for by permitting himself to be supposed such, and by having accepted the compasses and square, lying upon the holy hook of his faith on the holy altar, illuminated by the three lights that symbolize the Deity — the compasses and the square which are the symbols of God the Creator, and of nature, of which God is the soul and whose forces are His varied actions — as a true symbol of his moral and intellectual condition, he in the most solemn manner pledges his faith and soul and honor to all his Brethren and the whole Order, that he is and will continue to be in all things such as he so represents himself.

And if, ever afterwards, when present in the Master's Lodge, he feels and knows that the compasses and square, as they lie there, are not a true symbol of himself, but false, because these are not so, he is a living lie, and should turn his back upon the symbol and upon his Brethren and go mournfully away.

Thus the question, by what right are the compasses and square made two of the Great Lights of the Lodge, fit be counted as such with the Holy Book of one's faith, is, it seems to me, satisfactorily answered; and I know no other way in which it can be.

And we may now, perhaps, learn what is the meaning of the phrase, that, "the principal tenets of Masonry are included between the two points of the compasses." You may perhaps see it now: but I think if I had at the beginning, asked you who read this to stop and reflect upon the phrase, and see if it had any meaning to you, you would, after repeating it to yourself again and again, have been compelled to admit that it is one of those phrases which sound well and seem to mean something, but which when examined, are found to consist only of so many words arranged in a sentence which has no meaning at all.

But "the principal tenets of Masonry" are the whole moral law, and that moral law wholly consists of the dictates of the Moral Sense and the conclusions of Reason; and as these are symbolized by the compasses, it follows that the principles of that law or the tenets of Freemasonry, are included between the two points of the compasses.

You may now also understand why a Master Mason has "passed from the square to the compasses" and from the high place of Gibeon, where the ark of the covenant rested, to the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite, the site of the temple in which it was finally deposited.

The three lesser lights, it is said, are the sun, the moon and the Master of the Lodge. How long is the Lodge, how broad, how high and how deep? The Universe is the Lodge by Masonry's own definition.

The sun and moon, to the ancient Egyptians, represented Osiris and Isis; one said to be the Deity and the other nature. But we get little knowledge as to what the Egyptian Deities really meant, from the monumental inscriptions cut in stone by command of the old monarchs of Egypt. I believe that Osiris was the Deity as Will and Power, and Isis, the Divine Wisdom in the Deity. Thoth was the Divine Word, the utterance in Humanity of the Divine Wisdom. The Greeks called him Hermes, and represented him as the giver of all knowledge to men. He was the Logos; of whom St. John afterwards said that He was in the beginning with God and was God.

In the old Hermetic engraving copied at the beginning of this lesson, the sign of the planet Mercury is above those of the sun and moon, midway between them; and the Greeks called this planet also Hermes. He is the nearest to the sun of all the planets; and consequently is seldom seen; for if he rises before the sun, his rise is so little a while before the sun's; and if he sets after the sun, his setting is so little a while after that of the sun, that he is almost always in the golden glow of light of sunrise or sunset so that one's eyes cannot discern him, I, being nearsighted, have never seen him, when another who was with me has; and Copernicus, the great Danish astronomer it is said, died lamenting that he had never seen him in all his life.

To the Egyptian Hermes, Thoth, is ascribed the promulgation of the philosophy distinguished by his name as the Hermetic: and various writings in Greek, by unknown authors, have been ascribed to him, some of which are still extant. Into the possession of the Hermetic philosophy came the symbols used by Pythagoras with his secret explanations of them, and his doctrines in regard to numbers; the knowledge of all which was always confined to a few adepts, and so became almost universally misunderstood. In the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Hermeticism became connected with Alchemy; and by what seemed mere jargon and an unmeaning babble of words, the meanings of its symbols and their true explanations were carefully concealed from the multitudes, and as carefully from the Priesthood, who would have pronounced the doctrines heretical and burned at the stake those who taught them.

We find in Freemasonry the principal symbols of the religious doctrines of the Zend Avesta, the book of the faith of the ancestors of Medians and Persians, and of their priests, styled the magi, "The wise men of the east," who possessed the doctrines when Cyrus, of Median descent, became Master of the great city of Babylon. These doctrines Pythagoras learned; and as he could not have learned them elsewhere, the presumption is that the tradition is a true one, that he visited Babylon and was a pupil of the magi, as he had been of the Egyptian priests. He made these doctrines known to his disciples among the Greeks and invented symbols, especially the right-angled triangle and the lesser and the greater tetractys, to perpetuate the knowledge of them among the adepts and conceal it from all the rest of the world; in which he was so successful that, as Plutarch, ascribing the use of the right-angled triangle to the Egyptians, interpreted it in a manner altogether incorrect, so Yamblichus, writing of the life of Pythagoras, showed a profound ignorance of the meaning of his symbols; and the meaning of what the great philosopher said as to the virtues of numbers unconnected with things, as totally unknown yet.

Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth, the Divine Word, bearing the same name as the planet Mercury, was "The Master" of the Hermetic philosophers, the "Master" of the Universe, the Divine Presence in it, the Master of Light and Life, and the mode of concealment of things in Masonry is strikingly shown by questions and answers, "Have you seen your Master today," etc., given above. For Hermes, the planet, while in the blue ground of the sky is also always in the golden glory of the sun; and by these questions it was ascertained whether the person to whom they were put was a Mason, acquainted with the secret doctrines of the Hermetic philosophy.

By this and many other proofs we know that the symbols of Freemasonry were introduced into it by the Hermetic philosophers in England, one of whom at least was a Mason — Elias Ashmole.

The "Master of the Lodge" was Hermes, the Divine Word: and the phrase, "The sun, the moon and the Master of the Lodge:" finds its exact symbols and representation in the Hermetic engraving given at the beginning of this lesson.

The sun represents the Deity: the moon the Divine Wisdom and to these three the various triads of the Lodge allude.

Hermes said that the universe was the second god, and man the third, why and how, he did not clearly explain. The books bearing his name were given by those who did not intend to make known to the whole world the meanings of

their symbols. It would have been better if Masonic writers of books had imitated, their caution and reticence; for with Mackey's and Oliver's works on one side and our Monitors on the other, any Profane may know all that the mass of Masons know about Masonry.

Fortunately these writers could not disclose what they did not know, and the real meanings of our symbols are still our own, notwithstanding our itching for notoriety so prevalent now in the Order, and the irrepressible desire of Masonic journalists and others to print and publish everything.

The universe is the idea of the Divine Wisdom, realized, as the making under the direction of the inventor, perhaps without his own hands touching it, of the machine of wood and metal, is but the expression in these of the model in the mind of the inventor. It is in the universe that we see all of the Divine Wisdom that it has disclosed or will in this life disclose to us. In it alone we attain unto any knowledge of that Wisdom. It is the Soul of the Universe; and therefore the universe, its body is said to be the second god.

In Man is the Divine Word, the Voice and utterance of the Divine Wisdom, Every human intellect has in it something of the Divine nature.

It is a ray from that in the Deity which is something higher than our Reason and Intelligence, but of which these are effects, as light is an effluence from the flame of the fire. These are the doctrines of Hermetic Philosophy.

— Albert Pike, Esoterika [1888]

Image: This is the graphic referred to in Pike's essay