

A Study of the Winding Staircase

By Homer L. Zumwalt

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In the ritual of the modern day Masonic Degrees, the building of King Solomon's Temple plays an important role. It has also fascinated the Biblical scholar and the archaeologist in their attempts to prove the existence of the Temple and the Bible story of King Solomon. All through history this subject has produced an air of mystery which seems to defy a positive solution.

The Masonic scholar, willing to spend the time and effort, can spend hours of research on almost any one of the many features of King Solomon's Temple and still end on a note of mystery admitting that the subject is incomplete and more research is needed. An example to illustrate this point is the reference in the Second Degree which refers to the winding staircase, which we are led to believe existed in King Solomon's Temple. Although there is but one reference to the winding staircase in Masonic ritual, it has been made the central feature of the Second Degree which every Fellowcraft Mason must symbolically ascend in order to make his advancement in the degree. As all Masons will recall, the reference is made "to advance through a porch, by a flight of winding stairs to the middle chamber, there to receive his wages." The details very clearly give a winding staircase leading from the porch way entrance up through the Temple Sanctuary to the upper floors. This reference contains a number of specific and positive statements which we are apparently asked to accept as facts. They are (1) that there was a winding staircase in King Solomon's Temple; (2) that it was approached through an entrance from the porchway; and (3) that the workmen on the building ascended these stairs to receive their wages in the middle chamber. The serious researcher will find that writers of the Charges and ritual of the craft were apparently more interested in the dramatic effect on the candidate than they were on historical accuracy. Biblical scholars and archaeologists differ widely as to the interpretation placed both on historical and the archaeological evidence dealing with King Solomon's Temple and in particular, with the passages dealing with the staircase, but it's fairly safe to say that neither the Biblical scholar nor the archaeologists would support the specific statements made in the Masonic ritual of the Second Degree.

As of today, the only historical evidence relative to the building of Solomon's Temple is found in three different books of the Old Testament and in the writings of Josephus. Of these writings, it is generally accepted that the version in the First Book of Kings is both the oldest and most reliable description we have of the Temple. Our interest here is the mention of the winding staircase. The passages relevant to the winding staircase are found in Chapter 6 of the Authorized Version, which is probably the one used by the ritualists who composed the Lecture on the Second Degree.

First Kings, Chapter 6, Verse 1: "And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zip, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord."

Verse 5: "And against the wall of the house he built chambers round about, against the walls of the house round about, both of the temple and of the oracle; and he made chambers round about."

Verse 7: "And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither; so that there was neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building."

Verse 8: "The door for the middle chamber was in the right side of the house; and they went up with winding stairs into the middle chamber and out of the middle into the third."

The description above clearly states that there were winding stairs, but an examination of the text finds inconsistencies in the passages themselves and serious discrepancies are noticed between our Masonic ritual and the scriptures above. An example is in Verse 8 which places the entrance door for the middle chamber in the right side of the building. It continues by stating that the stairway went from the door to the middle chamber and on up to the third chamber. No mention is made to an entrance on the ground floor.

The second Bible reference is in Chronicles, Book II, Chapter 3, Verses 1-9. The description, which parallels the Kings version, omits all references to the chambers except for Verse 9 which states: "And he overlaid the upper chambers with gold..." It is widely accepted that the "upper chambers" in Chronicles are the "Side chambers" mentioned in Kings. Notice that there is no mention of a winding staircase.

The third description is found in the Book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel came from a priestly family and some researchers think could have lived at a time which would have enabled him to have seen Solomon's Temple first hand. However, at the time of his writing, the Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The parallel passages of the above quoted from Kings and Chronicles are to be found in the 41st Chapter of Ezekiel, but differs from the other two.

Ezekiel, Chapter 41, Verse 6: "And the side chambers were three, one over another, and thirty in order; and they entered into the wall which was of the house for the side chambers around about, that they might have hold, but they had not hold in the wall of the house."

Verse 7: 1 "And there was an enlarging, and a winding about still upward to the said chambers; for the winding about of the house went still upward round about the house; therefore, the breadth of the house was still upward, and so increased from the lowest chamber to the highest by the midst." It would appear that what Ezekiel was trying to say is that the chambers themselves wound about the house in long galleries. By "wound about" does he mean encircle? He makes no reference to a staircase. There are other differences noted in the three versions of the Old Testament.

Our Masonic view was probably taken from the translation of the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, which contained many mistranslations in the relevant passages. The translators themselves were aware of the difficulties, for attached to their manuscripts are numerous marginal notes and questions. Biblical Hebrew text often presents difficulties in translation and some cases impossible to a point of where one can only surmise at the true meaning.

Prof. Robert H. Pfeiffer of Harvard University and Boston University in "An Introduction to the Old Testament" writes: "The third element in Solomon's magnificence consisted of his buildings, primarily on Zion in Jerusalem, but elsewhere. The account in Chapter 6, Verses 1-9 is one of the most difficult sections in the Old Testament. First, owing to scribes who failed to understand architectural terms and the obscure descriptions of the original author, neither an architect nor a clear writer, the text has been greatly corrupted. Secondly, the account has endured successive additions and revisions."

The first difficulty comes from the Hebrew text of Verse 8 in which one word is defective. The word appears as "Lullim" and then translated to English as "Winding Stairs." Scholars point out that if the word is really "Lullim" it appears nowhere else in the Old Testament, but an associated word "Lulin" appears in several passages of the Jewish code known as the "Mishna" and later called the "Talmud."

One reference reads: "there were Lulin in the upper chamber opening into the Holy of Holies, by which the workmen were let down in baskets, so that they should not feed their eyes on the Holy of Holies." Most translators translate this word to mean "opening" while others translate the word as "Trap-doors." The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume 12, pp. 85,92 says that the word "Lullin" refers to "trapdoors" but gives no supporting evidenced to the meaning.

The second difficulty from the Hebrew text comes from the original word "Tichonah" translated as "middle" in our phrase from Kings, Verse 8, "the door for the middle chamber was in the right side of the house." The meaning of the word "Tichonah" is uncertain, but most modern translators refer to it as the "lowest" instead of "middle." This seems to make more sense.

Dr. James Moffat in his translation of the Bible in 1924 entitled "A New Translation of the Bible" translated Verse 8 in Kings this way: "The entrance into the lower side rooms was on the south side of the Temple; you climbed to the middle row, and from the middle to the top row, through trap doors."

In 1965, another translation came out in an English Edition of the "Jewish Bible" with Verse 8: "The entrance to the lower story was at the right hand corner of the Temple and access to the middle story above was by trap doors and so from the middle story to the third." There is no reference to winding stairs.

If the Temple had a winding staircase, as a few scholars still think, it was probably in the side walls and served the side chambers built into the thickness of the walls from the first and second levels. These side chambers were used while the Temple was being built for the purpose of paying the workmen their wages. Later, they were used as store-houses or treasury rooms of the Temple into which the treasures and gifts to the Temple were placed.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the other source of information about King Solomon's Temple is in the writings of Josephus, a Jewish historian. He mentions Solomon's Temple in several of his works, but the main references are in his history of the Jewish people called "The Antiquities of the Jews." One relevant passage quoted from Wriston's translation, Book VIII, Chapter 3: "The King also had a fine contrivance for an ascent to the upper room over the Temple, and that was by steps in the thickness of its wall; for it had no large door on the east end, as the lower house had, but the entrances were by the sides, through very small doors."

Apart from Josephus and the Bible, we have no other literary source to turn to for information. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in Jerusalem to which we might gain a knowledge of this subject, for successive conquerors made a thorough job of the destruction of the Temple and not one part remains standing and nothing has been uncovered by archaeologists. Regardless of whether there was a winding staircase, a trap-door or just an opening to the different compartments of the Temple, the mystery still remains, and will continue to fascinate both the biblical scholar and the archaeologist and be of particular interest to the Freemason.

References: Books of The Old Testament, Standard Work-Grand Lodge of Illinois; The Mystery of the Winding Staircase by A. L. Shane; and A New Translation of the Bible by Dr. James Moffat.

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