

Sprig Of Acacia

Unknown

Any discussion of the Acacia, important to Freemasonry as one of its fundamental and most beautiful symbols, should begin with clearing away a little of the “rubbish of the Temple” which results from the careless writing of unlearned men. So much has been published about the Acacia which simply is not so that it is no wonder that Freemasons are frequently confused as to what the plant really is, how it came to be a symbol of immortality, and what its true place in religious history may be.

We cannot accurately denote a particular plant or tree as “the Acacia plant” or “the Acacia tree” for the same reason that we cannot accurately specify “the Rose bush” or “the pine tree.” There are too many varieties of roses, too many kinds of pine trees to distinguish one from the other merely by the definite article.

As botanists know more than four hundred and fifty varieties of Acacia, “the acacia can be only the most general of terms, meaning them all.” So perhaps it is not to be wondered at that we find one Masonic writer speaking of the “spreading leaves of the Acacia tree” and another talking of “the low thorny shrub which is the Acacia.” We have no certainty that the trees and shrubs now growing in Palestine are the same as those which flowered in Solomon’s era. So that it is not impossible that “Acacia totilis (in Arabic, Es-sant)” and “Acacia Seyal (In Arabic Sayal)” grew to greater size three thousand years ago than they do now. But authorities doubt that the Acacia which grows low, as a bush, and which in all probability must have been the plant which one of the three plucked from the ground as the “Sprig of Acacia,” ever grew large enough to supply boards three feet wide. Wynn Westcott says: “The Acacia is the only tree of any size which grows in the deserts of Palestine, but it has been doubted that even it ever grew large enough to provide planks one and one-half cubits in width.”

Scholars are united in saying the “Shittah Tree” of the Old Testament is an Acacia; and that “Shittim”, the plural, refers to Acacia. In Joel (3-18), one of the poetic and beautiful prophecies of the Old Testament, we read:

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim.”

Commentators place the “valley of Shittim” as possibly the Kidron of Exekiel; but certainly as some dry, thirsty valley where the Acacia, which flourished where other plants perished from lack of water, was known to grow; another reason for thinking the original Acacia which Freemasons revere was the smaller shrub, rather than the large tree. Inasmuch as Akakia” in Greek signifies “Innocence,” it was wholly natural for Hutcheson (Spriti of Masonry, 1795) to connect the Masonic plant with the Greek definition. He said:

“We Masons, describing the deplorable state of religion under the Jewish Law, speak in figures; “Her Tomb was in the rubbish and filth cast forth of the Temple, and Acacia wove its branches over her monument;” “akakia” being the Greek word for innocence, or being free from sin, implying that the sins and corruptions of the old law and devotees of the Jewish altar had hid religion from those who sought her, and she was only to be found where innocence survived under the banner of the Divine Lamb; and as to ourselves, professing that we were to be distinguished by our “Acacy,” or as true “Acacians,” in our religious faith and tenets.”

It is now well understood that Hutcheson, great as is the debt we owe him, was too anxious to read a Christian interpretation into everything Masonic to be considered as infallible. While the coincidence of the Greek word our name for the Shittah-Tree is suggestive, it hardly seems sufficient to read “innocence” into the symbol when it already has so sublime a significance.

Mackey considers the acacia also as a symbol of initiation, because sacred plants were symbolical of initiation in many of the Ancient Mysteries, from which Freemasonry derived so much. The modern Masonic scholar is rather apt to pass over this meaning, he is also thinking that a symbol already so rich needs no further meanings to make it important and beautiful.

Apparently the beginning of the association of the acacia with immortality is in the legend of Isis and Osiris, one of the oldest myths of mankind, traced back into Egypt many thousands of years before the Christian era. Its beginnings, like those of all legends which have endured, are shrouded in the mist which draws a veil between us and the days before history.

According to the legend, Osiris, who was at once both King and God of the Egyptians, and was tricked by his brother Typhon (who was very jealous of Osiris), during the King’s absence on a beneficent mission to his people. Later, at a feast provided for the King-God’s pleasure, Typhon brought a large chest, beautiful in workmanship, valuable in the extreme, and offered it as a gift to whoever possessed a body which best fitted the chest. When Osiris entered the box, Typhon caused the lid to shut and fastened; after which the whole was thrown into the Nile.

Currents carried it to Byblos, Phoenicia, and cast it ashore at the foot of an acacia tree. The tree grew rapidly and soon encased the chest holding the body of Osiris.

When Isis, faithful queen, learned of the fate of her husband she set out in search of the body. Meanwhile the King of the Land where the acacia concealed the body, admiring the tree’s beauty, cut it down and made of its trunk, a column. Learning this, Isis became nurse to the King’s children and received the column as her pay. In the tree trunk, preserved, was the body of Osiris.

During their long captivity at the hands of the Egyptians; what more natural than that the Israelites should take for their own a symbol already old, and make of the “Shittah-Tree” a symbol of immortality, just as had been done in Egypt?

It is perhaps too much to say that Israelites were the first to plant a sprig of acacia at the head of a grave as a symbol of immortality. But that they did so in ancient times is stated by many historians. Dalcho assigns a novel reason for this practice; that as the Codens, or Priests, were forbidden to step upon or over a grave, it was necessary that spots of internment be marked, and, the acacia being common, it was elected for the purpose.

Mackey disagrees with Dalcho as to these reasons for marking a grave with a living plant. Perhaps the origin of the custom is not important; certain it is that all peoples in almost all ages have planted or laid flowers on the graves of those they love, as a symbol of the resurrection and a future life. The lily of the modern church, the rosemary which is for remembrance, the sprig of acacia of the ancient Israelites and the modern Mason, have all the same meaning upon a grave – the visual expression of the dearest hope of all mankind.

It is both curious and interesting to learn that many trees, in many climes, have been symbols of immortality. India gave to Egypt the lotus, long a sacred plant; the Greeks thought the myrtle the tree of immortal life, and the mistletoe, which survives in our lives merely as a pleasant diversion at Christmas, was held by the Scandinavians and the Druids as sacred as we consider the acacia.

Association of a plant and immortality is emphasized in the New Testament – see John 12:24:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” Also familiar passages from St. Paul (First Corinthians 15:36,37) used so much in funeral services:

“Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die; and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain...” Finally we find in our own stately prayer in the Master’s Degree, such a coupling up of a tree and life immortal; “For there is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branches thereof will not cease.” – which of course, is taken from Job 14:7.

Thus there is ample historical recognition of the connection between that which grows and dies and grows again, and the idea of immortality; we do not have to consider the undoubted fact that “shittah-trees” cut to form beams of house, often sprouted branches even when they had no roots, nor our own thought of almost any variety of pine as “the evergreen, or ever living” tree, to see that there is much background behind the symbol.

It is one of the glories of Freemasonry that so much has been made of the symbol, so dear and deep a meaning vested in it, that it has almost equaled the square as Freemasonry’s nearest and dearest. All that was mortal on Tyrian lay murdered in a grave “dug six feet due east and west.” The genius of the Temple was no more. No more designs upon the trestleboard; no more

glorious architecture to come from that mighty brain; no more holding of meetings with Solomon and Hiram in the Sanctum Sanctorum – the Widow’s Son was dead!

Of those who search one finds a sprig of acacia. Oh, immortal story; thrice immortal ritual makers, who coupled together a resurrection and a sprig of green! True, he whose mother was of the Tribe of Naphtali was destroyed, but his genius lived, his spirit marched on, his virtues were recorded in stone and in the hearts of those who built on Mt. Moriah’s heights.

For at least two hundred years and probably much longer the sprig of acacia has held Freemasonry’s premier teaching. The grave is not the end. Bodies die and decay, but something “which bears the nearest affinity to that which pervades all nature and which never, never, dies,” rises from the grave to become one of that vast throng which has preceded us. Error can slay, as can evil and selfish greed, but not permanently. That which is true and fair and fine cannot be destroyed. Its body may be murdered, its disappearance may be effected, the rubbish of the Temple and a temporary grave may conceal it for a time, but where is interred that which is mortal, there grows an evergreen or ever living sprig of acacia – acacia none the less that it may be a spiritual sprig, a plant not of the earth, earthly.

When he who was weary, plucked at a sprig of acacia, he had “evidence of things not seen.” When we toss the little sprig of evergreen which is our usual cemetery “sprig of acacia” into the open grave of one of our brethren who has stepped ahead upon the path we all must tread, we give evidence of belief in a “thing not seen.”

For never a man has seen the spirit of one who has gone, or visioned the land where no shadows are. If we see it in our dreams, we see by faith, not eyes. But we can see the acacia – we can look back through the dragging years to the legend of Osiris and think that even as the acacia grew about his body to protect it until Isis might find it, so does the acacia of Freemasonry bloom above the casket from which, in the solemn words of Ecclesiastes “the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

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