

The All-Seeing Eye

Unknown

In the modern Masonic ritual the All-Seeing Eye is combined with the Sword, pointed at a Naked Heart; which latter emblem apparently came to American Freemasonry through Webb. The quotation from his Monitor (1797) is as follows:

“The Sword pointing to a Naked Heart demonstrates that justice will sooner or later overtake us, and although our thoughts, words and actions may be hidden from the eyes of man, yet the All Seeing Eye, whom the Sun, Moon and Stars obey, and under whose watchful care even comets perform their stupendous revolutions, pervades the whole, and will reward us according to our merits.”

The Sword and Naked Heart were probably adopted by Preston from early initiation ceremonies of the Continent, probably French, in which even today we find some degrees of some rites dressed with swords which are pointed at the candidate. But the essential part of this symbol, the All-Seeing eye, is hoary with antiquity, and, in one form or another, has been identified with early religions and mysteries from their beginnings.

It seems natural for men to personify his members in order to symbolize a virtue. The foot is universally a symbol of swiftness; the arm, of strength; the hand, of fidelity. The hand we extend to clasp that of a friend must be open, showing it contains no weapon; the knight of old removed his mailed gauntlet before offering his hand, to indicate that he greeted a friend from whom he feared no attack. From this we get our modern concept that it is good manners to remove a glove before shaking hands.

The eye was adopted early as a symbol of watchfulness, for reasons too obvious to set forth. By a natural transition, the watchful eye never slept, and which thus saw everything, speedily became the symbol of Deity.

Hear the Psalmist (XXXIV): “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.”

Again (CXXI), “He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” A Proverb reads: “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.”

Egypt symbolized her God and King, Osiris, by a open eye; it was in all the Temples, and is frequently found sculptured in stone together with a throne and a square, symbolic of Osiris' power and rectitude. One of the great curiosities of the world is the similarity, often identity, of ideas, inventions, discoveries, conceptions of peoples far removed, the one from the other, both in time and geographical location. The primitive loom, for instance, is strikingly similar in Egypt, India, South America, Africa and among the Esquimaux. The Swastika (symbol made of four joined squares), often termed the oldest of symbols, is to be found literally all over the world. So is the point within a circle, and the square as an emblem is found in early Egypt, Rome and China, to mention only three.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find so obvious a symbol as a watchful eye typifying Deity in the uttermost ends of the earth. That it was called the "All-Seeing Eye" in Vedic hymns a thousand years older than Christianity, and in a land as far as India from that we are wont to consider the cradle of Masonry, is a fact to make any student think.

Forty years ago the Reverend J.P. Oliver Minos drew Masonic attention to one of the Ric-Veda Hymns especially addressed to "Surya," or the Sun:

"Behold, the rays of dawn, like heralds, lead on high.
The Sun, that men may see the great all knowing God.
The Stars slink off like thieves, in company with Night,
Before the All-Seeing Eye, whose beams reveal his presence,
Gleaming like brilliant flames, to nation after nation."

In the religions of India the eye is of high importance and prominence. Suva; one of the most important of the Gods of India, is pictured with three eyes, one more brilliant than the other two. Drawings are for sale in the market places of Benares and other Indian cities which visiting Masons often think are Masonic, merely because they portray the All-Seeing Eye. Indian religious devotees consider the peacock a sacred bird because of the resemblance of the feathers to an eye.

As a symbol of Deity the eye is a natural hieroglyph. The connotation of sleeplessness, vision, knowledge is easily grasped by even a child-like intellect. But it is also, and for the same reason, a symbol of the sun; indeed, sun worship antedated almost all, if not all, other forms of worship.

The sun was worshiped by too many peoples in too many lands and ages to attempt to catalog here. Shamash was sun God to Assyrians, Merodach to the Chaldees, Ormuzd to the Persians, Ra to the Egyptians, Tezzatlipoca to the Mexicans, Helios to the Greeks and Sol to the Romans to mention only a few.

The sun is the source of a hundred myths; familiar is that of Helios, who drove his chariot daily across the sky. The Scandinavian God Sunna was in constant dread of being devoured by the wolf Fenris (symbol of the eclipse); Phaeton was the son of Phoebus, the sun, and stole his

fathers chariot to drive across the heavens. Unable to control the fiery steeds, he came to near the earth and parched Libya into a land of barren sands, blackening the inhabitants of Africa and so heating that continent that it never recovered normal temperature! Had not Zeus transfixed him with a thunderbolt, he would have destroyed the world.

Modern poets and ancient have sung of the sun as thee eye of day; we recall:

“The night has a thousand eyes
And the day but one
But the light of the whole world dies
When the day is done.”

Diogenes Laertius thought of the sun as an incorruptible heavenly being when he wrote:

“The sun, too shines into cesspools and is not polluted.”

Dryden translated Ovid to read:

“The glorious lamp of heaven,
The radiant sun,
Is nature’s eye.”

Hear Milton:

“Thou sun! Of this great world both eye and soul!”

Freemasonry does not make of the eye a symbol of the sun. Her All-Seeing Eye is one emblem, her sun another, each with a distinct meaning. One of the Lesser Lights represents the sun; the sun shines out from between the legs of the compasses, open sixty degrees on a quadrant, in the Past Master’s Jewel, all symbolic of the Masonic light which must come from the East from which comes all truth.

It has been written: “The sun is the symbol of sovereignty, the hieroglyphic of royalty, it doth signify absolute authority; By analogy, if the lodge is the symbol of the world, then the Master, who controls the time of opening and closing, may well have one of the Lesser Lights as his symbol. Mackey goes further to say that the Master is “himself” a symbol of the rising sun, the Junior Warden of the sun at meridian, and the Senior Warden of the setting sun, just as the Mysteries of India the three chief priests symbolize Bramha, the rising sun, Siva, the meridian, and Vishnu the setting sun.

In the Orphic mysteries the sun was thought to generate, as from an egg, and come forth with power to triplicate himself; triple power (such as is found in a Lodge under a Master, Senior and Junior Warden) is an idea as old as mythology, as may be seen in the trident of Neptune, the three-forked lightning of Jove, the three-headed Cerebus of Pluto.

See how fitly the sun, as a symbol of authority, the sun, as man’s earliest deity, and the sun, as origin of the eye as a symbol of God, can be united. In his “Symbolic Language” Wemyss wrote:

“The sun may be considered to be an emblem of Divine truth because the sun, or the light of which it is the source, is not only manifest in itself, but makes other things manifest; so one

truth detects, reveals and manifests another, as all truths are dependent on and connected with each other, more or less.”

So does the Master make Masonic truth manifest to the brethren; so does the Great Architect manifest His Divine truth to all men.

If it is further necessary to show a connection between eye and sun, sun and God, and thus eye and God; refer again to the passage from Webb, which couples the All-Seeing Eye with the sun, moon and stars. Sufficient has been said to make it evident that the All-Seeing Eye is not a modern symbol, or one lightly to be regarded or passed over in silence, merely because modern ritual makes comparatively little of it. Alas, many brethren are so ill-instructed in the ancient Craft that it is a matter of some wonder to them why officer’s aprons, when decorated with emblems so often have the All-Seeing Eye upon the flap; why that pregnant symbol is so frequently engraved upon working tools, or the square and compasses which lie upon the Altar.

Throughout the Craft emphasis is put upon the number three; three Light (greater and lesser); three steps on the Master’s carpet; three steps at the beginning of the Winding Stairs; three principal officers; three degrees; three due guards; etc. ,etc. The number three is but another way of expressing the idea of a triangle, one of man’s earliest, if not the earliest symbol for Deity, inasmuch as it is the simplest closed figure (signifying endlessness) which can be formed with straight lines.

The emphasis upon three, then, is Freemasonry’s symbol of omneity of Deity – His being without beginning or ending.

The letter “G” as a symbol of Deity particularly speaks of the reverence we owe to the supreme architect; His omniglory.

Lodges are opened and closed with prayer, symbol of the loving omnipresence of the Great Architect; Freemasons believe that where two or three are gathered together in His name. there His is also, in the midst of them.

On our Altar lies His Holy Book, rule and guide of our faith, symbol of His Omnipotence, since in it are the prophecies and histories of the powers of the Most High.

The All-Seeing Eye is significant of His Omniscience; that the Supreme Architect sees all and knows all, even the hidden secrets of the human heart.

Here, indeed. is the kernel of the nut, the inner meaning of the symbol which has come down to us from so many diverse ages, so many religions, which has been interwoven with sun and pagan gods and myths, nature religion and many kinds of worship, which was old when Egypt was young and ancient when India was new.

The All-Seeing Eye is to Freemasons the cherished symbol not only of the power but of the mercy of God – since, as has been beautifully said to comfort us who cannot always do as we

know we should, or even as we want – “to see all is to know all; to know all is to understand all; to understand all is to forgive all.”

Therefore the thinking Freemason has reverence for this symbol. He treats it not as one of many; rather as among those to be held in tenderest thought and most precious memory. The Sword pointing to the Naked Heart may thunder of justice, but the All-Seeing Eye whispers of justice tempered with complete understanding, which is man’s most lovely conception of Him who judges erring men.

STB – December 1932