

HIRAM ABIF

The word “Abif” (sometimes written “Abiff.” but far less often than with the single “F”) has in one way or another caused considerable controversy among both Biblical and Masonic scholars.

Those who are familiar with Hebrew speak learnedly of its derivation from Abi or Abiw or abiv - the consonants W and V being approximations, apparently, of a Hebrew sound not easily rendered in English letters. Our familiar King James Bible translates the word two ways “Hiram my father’s” and “Hiram his father” which in itself has led to some confusion as to whether our Hiram Abif was the only Hiram or the father of another. Scholars, however, are fairly well agreed that “my father” as a translation of “Abif” is correct if the words be understood as a title of honor. Hiram the Widow’s Son was “father” in the same sense that priests of the church are so known; the same variety of father that was Abraham to the tribes of Israel. Abif, then, is a title of respect and veneration, rather than a genealogical term.

Just when the legend of Hiram Abif came into our symbolism is a study by itself of which only a few bare facts can here be included. Common understanding believes that Hiram Abif has always been in our system, and descended to us from the days of Solomon. But critical scholarship will have none of “common understanding” and demands proof; names, dates, places, documents before setting a date to any happening.

Our oldest Masonic manuscript (Regius Poem, dated approximately 1390) traces Masonry not to Solomon but to Nimrod and Euclid, in a still earlier time. In this is no mention of Hiram Abif. The Dowland manuscript, dated about 1550, mentions him but only as one of many.

Not until The King James version of the Bible appeared (1611) do we find Hiram Abif known as such with any degree of familiarity. Yet here a curious fact is to be found; sometime after the new Bible made its appearance - late in the sixteen hundreds, when the King James version had become well known - interest in King Solomon’s Temple was so keen that many models were made and exhibited and handbooks about it printed and distributed. Such specific interest in this particular building from the then new book may easily have come from the familiarity of Operative and some Speculative Masons with the Temple symbolism and, by inference, with Hiram Abif. Anderson’s explanatory footnote of Hiram Abif in his Constitutions (1732) is as follows (spelling and capitalization modernized and Hebrew letters omitted):

“We read (2 Chron. ii, 13) Hiram, King of Tyre (called there Hiram), in his letter to King Solomon, says, I have met a cunning man, le hiram Abi not to be translated according to the vulgar Greek and Latin, Hiram my Father, as if this architect was King Hiram’s father; for his description, ver. 14, refutes it, and the original plainly imports, Hiram of my Father’s, viz, the Chief Master Mason of my Father, King Abibalus; (who enlarged and beautified the city of Tyre, as ancient histories inform us, whereby the Tyrians at this time were most expert in Masonry) tho some think Hiram the King might call Hiram the architect father, as learned and skillful men

were wont to be called of old times, or as Joseph was called the father of Pharaoh; and as the same Hiram is called Solomon's father, (2 Chron. iv, 16) where 'tis said:

Shelomoh lammelech Abhif Churam ghmasah. Did Hiram, his father, make to King Solomon. But the difficulty is over at once, by allowing the Abif to be the surname of Hiram the Mason, called also (Chap. ii, 13) Hiram Abi, as here Hiram Abif; for being so amply described (Chap. ii, 14) we may easily suppose his surname would not be concealed: And this reading makes the sense plain and complete, viz., that Hiram, King of Tyre, sent to King Solomon his namesake Hiram Abif, the prince of architects, decried (1 Kings vii, 14) to be a widow's son of the Tribe of Naphthali; and in (2 Chron. ii, 14) the said King of Tyre calls him the son of a woman of the daughters of Dan; and in both places, that his father was a man of Tyre, which difficulty is removed, by supposing his mother was either of the Tribe of Dan, or of the daughters of the city called Dan in the Tribe of Naphthali, and his deceased father had been a Naphthalite, whence his mother was called a widow of Naphthali; for his father is not called a Tyrian by descent, but his a man of Tyre by habitation; as Obed Edom the Levite is called Gittite, by living among the Gitties, and the Apostle Paul a man of Tarsus. But supposing a mistake in transcribers, and that his father was really a Tyrian by blood and his mother only of the Tribe either of Dan or of Naphthali, that can be no bar against allowing of his vast capacity, for as his father was a worker in brass, so he himself was filled with wisdom and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass; and as King Solomon sent for him, so King Hiram, in his letter to Solomon, says:

And now I have sent a cunning man, endued with understanding, skillful to work in Gold, silver, brass, iron, stone, timber, purple, blue, fine linen and crimson; also to grave any manner of graving, and to find out every device which shall be put to him with thy cunning men, and with the cunning men of My Lord David thy father. This divinely inspired workman maintained this character in erecting the Temple, and in working the utensils thereof, far beyond the performances of Aholiab and Bezaleel, being so universally capable of all sorts of Masonry."

In First Kings we read: "And King Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphthali and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass; and he was filled with wisdom and understanding and cunning to work all kinds of brass. And he came to King Solomon and wrought all his work."

In Second Chronicles Hiram, King of Tyre, is made to say:

"And now I have sent a cunning man, endued with understanding, Hiram my father's, the son of a woman of the daughters of Dan, and his father was a man of Tyre, skillful to work in gold and silver, in brass, iron, in stone and in timber, in purple and blue and fine linen, and in crimson, and to find out every device which shall be put to him, with thy cunning men, and with the cunning men of David, thy father."

Alas for those who would believe in the literal truth of the Legend if they could find but a single word to hang to; the end of the story of Hiram Abif is short and calm, not great or tragic. The Chronicler says "And Hiram finished the work that he was to make for King Solomon for the house of God" and the writer of Kings is no less brief:

“So Hiram made an end of doing all the work that he made King Solomon for the house of the Lord.”

This is not the place to speculate upon the formation of “The Master’s Part” into our Third Degree - critical scholarship does not believe our ceremony was cast into anything like its present form prior to 1725 at the earliest. But Anderson would not have devoted so much attention to Hiram Abif without some good reason; it seems obvious that “in some form,” the story of Hiram Abif was of importance in 1723, and by inference, in the Lodges which formed the Grand Lodge which led to the writing of the Constitutions. Facts are stubborn and frequently run counter to our desires. We would like to believe in the verity of the legends which cluster around Hiram Abif, but we actually know very little about him. In addition to six Biblical references, Josephus quotes Menander and Duis in reference to him two or three times, and refers independently as many more . . . and that is all; not very much on which to build our belief in his character, his greatness, his towering moral and spiritual entity.

On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to envisage any historic character at least in large outline by careful analogy with other contemporary characters, by reference to his time, his civilization, his opportunity, his work. Suppose that all we knew of George Washington was that he was General In Chief of the Revolutionary Army, lived at Mount Vernon, and was the first President of the United States. Much might be read of him merely from these three facts. Thirteen colonies, engaged in a struggle to the death for freedom, would not choose for a leader a man without experience in military affairs. The fact that the Revolution succeeded would tell us that his leadership must have been superb. That he was made First President of the new Republic would indicate with certainty that he had the confidence of the people as a soldier, a man, a leader, and consequently possessed a character to be admired and revered, otherwise he would not be so chose. Merely to look a Mount Vernon is to see a lover of beauty, a man of taste and education, one who loved the earth and its products; the great house speaks with emphasis of hospitality. Much more might be read of Washington from only these three facts, but enough has been said to show the process by which we may envisage something of Hiram Abif, even with only meager data.

Sacred history teaches much of the time of Solomon; of his queen, the daughter of Egypt; of Hiram, King of Tyre; of Adoniram, the tax collector; of officers Solomon set over various districts. We have a regal picture of Solomon’s court, and lengthy and minute description of the Temple.

The chief builder, architect, master workman, give him what title you will, could hardly have mixed in such company, directed the greatest work in Israel’s history, been received by Solomon from Hiram King of Tyre as the best he had to offer, and not been a man of parts, ability, skill, learning, culture. To think of him only as one “cunning to work all kinds of brass,” in other words, only as an artisan, is completely to misunderstand the too few words in Chronicles and Kings. Rather let us put our belief in the statement that Hiram Abif was “filled with wisdom and understanding” and recall Solomon’s many words of admiration for wisdom; he must have been a wise man indeed into whose charge Solomon the Wise was content to give his most ambitious undertaking.

It is commonplace that genius is eccentric; those touched with the divine fire are often “different” from men of more common clay. So it is not surprising that one legend tells of intense loyalty, of firmness and fortitude under duress, reading into these characteristics an exalted and elevated character, quite in keeping with the architect and builder of the Temple.

The distinction between architect and builder is often hazy - it should be acute. Our ritual speaks of Hiram Abif as one “who by his great skill in the arts and sciences was so effectually enabled to beautify and adorn the Temple,” which seems to make him a mere adorer! Anything wholly fitted to its use becomes beautiful because of unity and completeness, yet it is also true that what is also useful as a building is not necessarily beautiful to the eye. Any square box of a house gives as secure a shelter as one beautiful in proportion. But complete beauty of building comes when the utility is combined with an appeal to sense and soul.

The Temp[le built by Hiram Abif was no mere shelter; it was the expression of Israel’s love of God. To consider Hiram Abif as a mere decorator, beautifier, ornamenter is to deny the very thing for which he lived and - in the legend - gave his life. Architect he was, in all that the best sense of the word implies; builder he was, in that he carried out his own plans.

Of his physical being we have no details. The probability is that he stood about five feet six inches in height, was bearded, swarthy in countenance, had dark eyes, his hair likely long and curly, his shoulders broad - these were the characteristics of his people.

Doubtless he was married and a father when he built the Temple. The men of the Twelve Tribes married early; an unmarried man was almost unknown, so be it he was not a cripple, maimed or diseased. Hiram Abif would have a reasonable amount of wealth; the chief workman which Hiram, King of Tyre, sent to King Solomon who “wrought all his work” would be no tyro, amateur or beginner; but a man famed for his art and science and craftsmanship, and thus, one who had already won fame and fortune before he was given this, the greatest task ever laid on the shoulders of a man of the time of Solomon.

Undoubtedly he was regarded with awe and veneration by those workmen over whom he came to rule while building the Temple, and all their families and connections, because of his ability as a great artist. Tribes which but a short time back had been tent-dwelling nomads, whose art was small and whose handiwork was of the crudest, must have looked at one as skilled as Hiram Abif as at a magician, a miracle man, one equal to the very High Priest himself. No wonder they called him Abif, “my father!”

Hiram Abif must have been, at least in private, treated by Solomon as a familiar friend, as much an equal as was possible for an Eastern Potentate of absolute power and authority. Consultations would be daily in the building of the Temple. Hiram Abif would be received as an honored guest at Solomon’s table. If in public the Architect treated his lord and master with the profound respect which such as Solomon have always exacted from subjects high and low, it is probable that such asteroids were relaxed in private, so that there is nothing incongruous in our legendary picture of Solomon, King of Israel, Hiram, King of Trye, and Hiram Abif, acting together in concert as co-rulers - “our first three most excellent Grand Masters” - in governing the workmen and erecting the mighty structure which engaged their attention for seven years.

It is easy to say this verbal picture is but a flight of fancy. It is less easy to draw a less attractive one in its place and make it appear true. While we know Chronicles and Kings and a few other ancient accounts almost nothing of the architect, we do - thanks to patient scholarship, much digging in the earth, and a reading of the literature of all times - know much of the people of Israel, how they worked and ate and lived and loved and labored. After all, it is less important that our mental picture of the illustrious Tyrian be absolutely accurate in small detail than that we keep a true image of a venerated character in our hearts. The color of his eyes and hair matter little; the hue of his conscience, everything. We are told of his knowledge of art and building, of brass and stone, of carving and sculpture - knowing other great artists who have devoted their lives to the creation of the beautiful, it is with some assurance that we liken Hiram Abif's character to the average of great workmen who have labored to produce beauty before the eyes of Him they worshipped.

Legendary though our story of Hiram is, and must ever be, our conception of the Architect can continue to be an inspiring fact, and we are the better men and Masons that it is such a man as this we are taught to represent.