

OLD LEGENDS OF HIRAM ABIF

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According to an ancient Greek historian, Hiram Abif was "a son of a man of Tyre and whose mother was a Jewess of the House of David" -that is, of Judah. I Kings, VII, 13-14, tells us that he was a "widow's son of the Tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre." In 11 Chron., 11, 13-14, he is described as the son of a "woman of the daughters of Dan." The stories of his skill and "cunning" as an artificer and metal worker are told in scripture, as well as Masonic lore, and myth and legend.

The central character which he plays in Masonic teaching and ritual needs no repeating. The legends which exist about him, but which are not incorporated into Masonic work, form a fascinating and illuminating picture of a man about whom little factual knowledge exists. He may have been a member of the cult of Dionysian Artificers. (1) One old legend tells that prior to the start of construction of the Temple, King Solomon held a contest and offered a prize for the best design which could be drawn by any of the prospective workman. It was Hiram who drew the figure which we know as an illustration of the forty-seventh problem of Euclid.

He displayed and used the trestle board about which we hear in our ritual. It was a table of wood coated with wax. On this he drew his designs with a stylus of iron. Upon seeing the figure of the 47th problem and recognizing its significance, Solomon, with joy, laid the foundation stone of the Temple.(2)

There is a Moslem account that the jewel worn about the neck of Hiram Abif was inscribed with the "word." He wore this jewel on a chain of gold; and when he was attacked, he threw it down a well to prevent his assassins from obtaining it. It was later recovered from the well, which gives us yet another version of the "recovery of the word."(3)

Part of the credit for obtaining materials to enrich and adorn the Temple is given to Hiram Abif according to another old legend. Four years before construction of the Temple began, he purchased some curious and precious stones from an Arabian merchant. He was told that they had been found on an island in the Red Sea. He traveled there to investigate and was able to discover great quantities of topaz, which later was imported by ships of Hiram of Tyre in the service of King Solomon.(4)

There is an interesting legend of a Temple workman whose name was Cavelum. He was kinsman of King Solomon and was of the house of David; thus he had high status among the other workmen. In the process of inspection of work in progress on the north wall of the Temple at a place where the north gate was to be, Hiram Abif accidentally dislodged a stone. It fell and struck Cavelum,

who was killed. Hiram Abif was so overcome by grief that he ordered the north gate sealed and closed forever. (5)

This legend was once used as the basis for a degree called Fellow Craft Mark. Dr. Albert Mackey has stated that this was an early trace of the present Mark Master degree.

The Gothic Constitution Manuscripts, Chaphan and Colne No. 1, refer to Hiram and "Hiram of Tickus, a Mason's sonne." In another old Masonic writing there is a gap or a blank, which Masons of today (and we may assume of past days) would immediately fill with the name "Hiram Abif." Many authorities on this subject are of the opinion that the name of this man at one time had an esoteric significance, and it was forbidden to put it in written form. In other writings, substitute names are used. It is curious to note that the oldest of the ancient manuscripts often refer to him as "son of the King of Tyre."

There is also confusion about the name of Hiram because of a variety of spellings used in translations. The reference "Hiram, my father" is confusing. Many older writers failed to distinguish between Hiram of Tyre and Hiram Abif. There is also a legend that there were two workmen named Hiram who were actually father and son, that one was an architect while the other was a metal worker. Advocates of this theory point to the spelling of "Hiram" and "Hiram."(6)

In spite of our legend of the Third Degree (and it must be emphasized that it is legend and not history), the death of Hiram Abif is poorly documented. Consequently, many other legends have developed. Ancient stories of the Talmud tell us that at the completion of the Temple all the workmen were killed so that they could never build a temple to a heathen god--or according to some versions, so that they could never construct another building which would rival the Temple in magnificence. In still other versions, which come to us from Rabbinical lore, Hiram was the one of all the workmen who escaped death by being taken up into heaven like Enoch and Elijah.

Legend and conjecture lend a greater air of mystery to the circumstances of the death of this man, and scholars have called attention to the account by Virgil of the death of Polydorus as a possible source of the substance of our Third Degree Hiram legend. In this story King Priamus of Troy sent his son, Polydorus, to the King of Thrace, where he was killed and secretly buried. Aeneas discovered the body on a hillside because he pulled up an unrooted shrub at the site of the grave.

There is a legend which indicates that Hiram, King of Tyre, was not at the building site of the Temple in Jerusalem, but was in Tyre when the death of Hiram, as we know the legend in the Third Degree, occurred. Solomon was concerned, for Hiram Abif was an important individual and a citizen of Tyre. Solomon followed a cautious, diplomatic course by keeping Hiram of Tyre well informed of the capture, examination, and confession of guilt from the ruffians; and he inquired of King Hiram his wishes in the matter of the penalty that should be imposed. King Hiram replied to Solomon and the sentence was imposed and carried out as he directed.

This account appears in an old ritual, and the ruffians are identified by the last letters of their names. When combined, the letters form the mystic word of certain Eastern cults, "OAM." Certain mystic writers have made much of this coincidence.

One of the so-called Masonic rites which arose in the eighteenth century but has now faded from the scene was the Rite of Misraim, which consisted of more than ninety degrees. In this work, the legend was altered; and according to his version, Hiram Abif returned to Tyre when the Temple was completed. There he lived out his days in peace and contentment, surrounded by the material wealth with which he had been compensated by King Solomon. This account finds some support in the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus. He tells us that after the Temple was completed, the two great Kings remained friends. They often posed riddles to each other; and the King of Tyre obtained assistance in solving them from Hiram Abif, for whom Josephus uses the name Abdemon. Josephus also tells us that Hiram Abif spent his old age in Tyre.(6) In 2 Chron. 11, 14, we are told that Hiram Abif could "find out any device which should be put to him."

An Oriental legend traces the lineage of Hiram from Adam through Tubal Cain and Nimrod, the builder of the Tower of Babel. It deals with fantasies concerning various marriages of men to Oriental spirits and emphasizes an Eastern belief that all smiths were related to spirits of fire.

When Saba, the Queen of Sheba, visited King Solomon, she was much attracted to Hiram; and Solomon became jealous. He arranged with three workmen--Fanor, a Syrian Mason; Amru, a Phoenician carpenter; and Metusael, a Hebrew quarryman--to disrupt the casting of the brazen sea. The spilled molten metal would have killed Hiram, except that he was saved by the spirit of his ancestor, Tubal Cain.

Saba and Hiram fled. Hiram threw his jewel down a deep well, but he was taken by the assassins and killed by a blow to the head. They buried his body on a hill and planted an acacia bush on the grave.

Three masters later discovered his body. The account of the exclamations made by those who found the body of Hiram are the same as those given in an exposure of our ritual in the early part of the eighteenth century. There is even an account of an agreement concerning future action by masons to compensate for the loss of the word which had been inscribed on Hiram's jewel.

This legend continues with the finding of Hiram's jewel, which Solomon had placed on a triangular altar in a secret vault under the Temple. The vault was concealed by a stone, in the shape of a perfect cube, placed to seal the entrance.(7)

This account comes to us from writings of Sheite Moslems who were responsible for the taking of the American Embassy and the holding of its personnel captive in Iran in 1981.

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