

THE QUEST FOR THE LOST WORD

By Jaime Paul Lamb

The theme of the disappearance and substitution of the Master's Word is central to the Masonic Temple allegory. The eventual recovery of this Word is also presupposed in the narrative; thus implicating that the newly raised Master Mason is to dedicate both his efforts and his serious contemplation to the task. It would then follow that the quest for this Lost Word constitutes a Masonic imperative; it is something for which we, as Master Masons, must tirelessly search. But are we to search for an actual word? And, further, is this task meant to be completed at all?

In Masonic ritual, the first we hear of the Master's Word is in the Master Mason, or Third degree, ceremony. In its first context, the Word is one component of a larger body consisting of all the Secrets of a Master Mason, which may be assumed to include a sign and token. In this degree, the candidate, representing Grand Master Hiram Abiff, is accosted and eventually slain by Three Ruffians, rogue Fellowcrafts, who demand of him the Word (and/or Secrets); the possession of which being requisite in order to receive the wages of a Master Mason. With the death of Hiram Abiff, the Word is lost. King Solomon sends twelve Fellowcrafts in search of the Word, or a key to it, about the body or grave of the Grand Master. Finally, King Solomon says: "[...] as the Master's word is now lost, the first sign given at the grave, and the first word spoken, after the body is raised, shall be adopted for the regulation of all Masters' Lodges, until future generations shall find out the right." Thus, a substitute word, with which all Master Masons are entrusted upon being raised, has been hitherto employed.

Oliver, for one, does not place much importance on this substitute word, with which all Master Masons are familiar, as it was received at their third degree initiation:

"Respecting the lost word and its substitute, some say that King Solomon advised the change, while others affirm that the three Fellow Crafts adopted the substituted word without consulting him. And Dalcho observes that the interpolated word is not to be found in any language that ever was used. It is, in fact, not a word, but merely a jumble of letters, forming a sound without meaning." [Oliver, *The Freemason's Treasury*, Scholar's Choice, 2014, p. 301]

Ostensibly, a True Word is given in the "higher degrees" of the York and Scottish Rites, but these are vague and ultimately unfulfilling revelations. Are we to accept that the True Word is merely a certain pronunciation of the *Tetragrammaton*? While it is undeniable that contemplation of the Ineffable Name of God is extremely valuable – particularly when certain interpretive keys, such as qabalistic, gematriac and/or magical analysis, are applied – it seems a little too common and easily obtained. It would appear that all one need do is petition for membership in one Masonic appendant body or other and the keys to the kingdom are laid at their feet. While the "further Light" that may be gleaned from membership and participation in Masonic appendant bodies is of immense value, it would seem that, in an effort to provide a sense of value or completion, the composers of these rituals may have missed the single most important aspect of the greater Temple allegory: namely, that *the Word must remain lost*; for in the absence of this Mystery there can be no quest.

Mackey, in his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (1882), appears to support this argument: "No matter what was the Word, no matter how it was lost, nor why a substitute was provided, nor when nor where it was recovered. These are all points of subsidiary importance, necessary, it is true, for knowing the legendary history, but not necessary for understanding the symbolism. The only term of the myth that is to be regarded in the study of its interpretation, is the abstract idea of a word lost and afterward recovered."

It is not the purpose of this article to dictate what the Word or, more importantly, the *quest* for the Word means to the individual Master Mason, as this is a personal and subjective endeavor. However, the wealth of symbolic and allegorical teaching methods found within the Craft Freemasonry may be helpful toward this inner journey of self-discovery. Summarily, the quest for the Lost Word is analogous to the idea of the *journey* being the true object, as opposed to the *destination*, which is merely a device to demarcate a segment on an individual's path of introspection and gradual attainment of personal gnosis.