

Too often regarded in a simplistic way, the Mosaic Pavement that comprises the symbolic floor of the Lodge provides valuable and profound lessons to every contemplative Brother.

The Mystery of the Mosaic Pavement

SHAWN EYER EXPLORES THE POWERFUL MEANING OF ONE OF THE CRAFT'S MOST BASIC SYMBOLS.

Alternating squares of white and black traditionally form the symbolic floor of every Masonic Lodge. This Mosaic Pavement is among the most important and fundamental teachings of the first degree. It belongs to that special class of core symbolism that can be traced to the earliest days of speculative Masonry. The first printed reference to it may be within a list of symbols found in an advertisement entitled “Antediluvian Masonry” from around 1726. It mentions “lectures on Ancient Masonry” to be given on the Feast of St. John, including “an Oration in the Henlean stile, on the Antiquity of Signs, Tokens, Points . . . Bibles, Compasses, Squares . . . Mosaick Pavements, dented Ashlers, broached Turnels,” etc.¹

More context as to its meaning can be found in the classic exposure of 1730, *Masonry Dissected*. There we read that the Lodge is erected “Upon Holy

Ground,” situated “Due East and West,” and has the “clouded Canopy of divers Colours” for its covering. The antiphonal lecture then informs us:

Q: Have you any furniture in your Lodge?

A: Yes.

Q: What is it?

A: Mosaick Pavement, Blazing Star and Indented Tarsel.

Q: What are they?

A: Mosaick Pavement, the Ground Floor of the Lodge, Blazing Star the Centre, and Indented Tarsel the Border round it.²

Another early reference to the form of the lodge floor comes from W.: Bro.: John Coustos, who was initiated in England but relocated to Portugal in 1743, where he founded a lodge and was promptly arrested by the Inquisition and tortured for Masonic secrets. According to the official Church record:

The floor of the . . . Lodge has a design in white chalk wherein are formed several borders serving as orna-

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ment together with a blazing star with a ‘G’ in the middle, signifying the fifth science of Geometry, to which all Officers and Apprentices should aspire.³

While early sources refer to these symbols as lodge “furniture” or as the floor itself, eventually they would be standardized as the “internal ornaments” of the lodge. The Blazing Star is one of these internal ornaments, represented on the lodge floor in America, and in the center of the ceiling in English Constitution lodges. Regardless of their physical placement, these three interlocking symbols represent some of the oldest symbols in Craft Freemasonry, well established from the dawn of the Grand Lodge era. As one might expect, the earliest references bear only the faintest trace of the esoteric meanings that have been associated with these three intimately connected symbols. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine their meaning is simple or easily exhausted. It can be argued that they hold valuable secrets and profound implications — especially for the Masons of today.

For a variety of reasons, our familiarity with these important hieroglyphical emblems has been impeded. In thousands of American lodges, the internal ornaments are no longer physically present, and in the ritual work of many jurisdictions, the only description of it is relegated to monitors or education pamphlets. Yet, the Mosaic Pavement is the foundation of our beloved Temple and the sacrosanct form upon which each of us took his first steps in the lodge — first the halting step of a blind

and uncertain traveler, soon after the confident regular step of a just and upright Mason. Today’s Entered Apprentice is instructed:

The Ornaments of a Lodge are the Mosaic Pavement, the Indented Tessel, and the Blazing Star. The Mosaic Pavement is a representation of the ground floor of King Solomon’s Temple; the Indented Tessel, of that beautiful tessellated border, or skirting, which surrounded it, — the Blazing Star was in the centre. The Mosaic Pavement is emblematical of human life, chequered with good and evil; the Indented Tessel which surrounds it, of the manifold blessings and comforts which surround us, and which we hope to enjoy by a faithful reliance upon Divine Providence, which is hieroglyphically represented by the Blazing Star in the centre.⁴

This explanation is virtually identical in all American Masonic work. In it we see the emblem as a spiritual and moral paradigm. The center of the lodge is marked by the Blazing Star of divine Providence, whose power we can easily imagine radiating outward, providing grace in the otherwise bleak and equally-mixed world of good and evil; finally providing a kind of “silver lining” in the rewards and blessings of the outer border, safely received through the medium of the black and white squares. We see here a microcosm of the universe as suffused with the love of a God involved and ever-present, a radiant Benefactor who for His own reasons has woven an alternating tapestry that is

at times cruel from our perspective, but who actively crowns it with a special grace or Glory, finishing his work at the edges — perhaps unnoticed by some — with evidences of His nature and care, translated into tangible effects. Thus, two worlds are balanced and reconciled, and in some mysterious way, man perceives them both.

Here on this floor one discovers his situation in the grand scheme, and learns that the Lodge is grounded in a numinous vision of reality, in the notion of a universe as intimately fraught with the Holy as it is with right and wrong.

This direct representation of the reality of Good, Evil and the Transcendent comes to us in contrast to more popular — or at least more forcefully expressed — views that suggest these qualities are quaint delusions of the past. Unfortunately, the framers of our ritual could not have anticipated a future in which Good and Evil were generally considered to be outmoded concepts. We must understand the challenge that this situation represents, and we should remember, in our Masonic education and formation efforts, to express the symbolism of Freemasonry undiluted by errors of a culture that has become perhaps too uncomfortable with moral questions. Shakespeare said that “The web of our life is a mingled yarn, good and ill together.”⁵ Through the symbolism of the Pavement, and as other elements of the degrees, Freemasons learn that a man can and should be able to distinguish those threads, no matter how knotted they appear to be.

It is part of the mystery of the squares of black and white that only here, in the ideal bosom of the Lodge, do we see them so clearly and unmistakably. In the less orderly context of mundane life, their natures are intricately woven into every event. The black and white are ever-present, but difficult to discern. The enlightened verse of Bro. Alexander Pope addresses this point:

This light and darkness in our chaos join'd,
What shall divide? The God within the mind.
Extremes in Nature equal ends produce,
In Man they join to some mysterious use;
Tho' each by turns the other's bound invade,
As, in some well-wrought picture, light and shade,
And oft so mix, the diff'rence is too nice
Where ends the Virtue, or begins the Vice.
Fools! who from hence into the notion fall,
that Vice or Virtue there is none at all.
If white and black blend, soften, and unite
A thousand ways, is there no black or white?⁶

This is a potent reminder to us today. Often, we are taught that there are only “grey zones,” and no way to form an ethical system beyond whatever our own preferences may seem to be. But via the Mosaic Pavement, the Craft traditionally acknowledges good and evil as fundamental aspects of reality.

In British Freemasonry, the explanation of the Pavement and its related symbolism is different. In the Emulation Rite, which was developed in the years following the 1813 union of the Antients and the Moderns, and which most of our English brethren will find familiar, the symbols are interpreted this way:

[...]he Mosaic pavement is the beautiful flooring of a Freemason's Lodge, the blazing star the glory in the centre, and the indented or tessellated border, the skirtwork round the same. The Mosaic pavement may justly be deemed the beautiful flooring of the Lodge by reason of its being variegated and chequered. This points out the diversity of objects which decorate and adorn the creation, the animate as well as the inanimate parts thereof. The blazing star, or glory in the centre, refers us to the Sun, which enlightens the earth, and by its benign influence dispenses blessings to mankind in general. The indented or tessellated

border refers us to the planets, which in their various revolutions form a beautiful border or skirtwork round that grand luminary, the Sun, as the other does round that of a Freemason's Lodge.⁷

Where the American work presents a moral scheme, the English ritual represents what seems instead to be a physical scheme, where the center represents the Sun, the outer border the planets, and the floor between them both lively and lifeless matter. The circumambulation around the Altar becomes a microcosm of the paths of the worlds around that star that is the source of sustenance for earthly life. It is an interesting poetic image: as the planets collect energy from the sun as they make their orbits, so we collect blessings from the Deity as we make our circumambulations. Both are vividly represented by the Tessellated Border.

Most notable is the identification of the Blazing Star with the Sun, rather than with God. Although elsewhere the Emulation Rite frequently refers to the Sun as “the Glory of God,” here this meaning is not at all explicit. So, one tradition presents a symbol of the connection between God and man through the matrix of Good and Evil, while the other offers a cosmic map of the solar system, a swirl of matter and occasionally of living things, bound together by light and gravitation.

Despite the apparent distance between these traditions, they are both children of a common parent, and each is as correct as the other.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, W.: Bro.: William Preston wrote and refined seminal lectures on the Masonic degrees. Although lectures existed prior to his work, Bro.: Preston is credited with skills both of harmonization and innovation, and his work formed the basis of all later English-language lectures — particularly of the American work, and to a lesser degree the English.⁸

Preston's lecture eliminates the confusion that may result from comparing the American and the British work. It is given here in a lightly edited form to de-emphasize its original catechetical format:

[...T]he internal ornaments of the building... consist... [o]f the mosaic or chequered pavement; the blazing star; and the indented skirting... The first is the beautiful and variegated floor on which we tread; the second is the centre of the covering, which is the first object of our attention; the third is the finished border, which surrounds the building, unites the separate parts in harmony, and gives strength and stability to the whole. [...The] moral picture... they convey to the mind [... is...] a curious delineation of all the beauties of nature and art agreeably blended: so as at once to attract the eye, and captivate the mind.

[...T]he first ornament exhibit[s] [a] true emblem of the variety that is displayed in the works of the creation; and of all the vicissitudes to which the life of man is exposed in the midst of that creation... exemplified... [b]y adverting to the instability of human events; as today we may tread the flowery mead of prosperity; and tomorrow we may totter on the rude track of adversity.

[...T]he second ornament exhibit[s...] [a] lively emblem of the omnipresence of the Deity, who superintends with love and beneficence, the various works he has created... exemplified... [b]y our beholding in that figure, infinite goodness, overshadowing the whole system and darting, as it were, from his beneficent bounty, beams of love and mercy, to the beings of every species formed by him.

[...T]he third ornament exhibits [...a] striking emblem of the care of Providence in the preservation of existence, [...e]xemplified [... b]y Divine wisdom concentrating into one mass the disjointed parts of the creation, and cementing the whole in union, for general preservation and protection.

What is the Grand Moral? That in contemplating the ornaments of our building we are taught that, in union our system is formed; and in union it must be preserved. That symmetry and proportion grace the general construction, while harmony completes the figure and crowns the labour of the artist, with permanence and durability.⁹

Here, in Preston's full explanation of the matter, we see that the emblem's three symbols actually work together to communicate a profound teaching about the interconnectedness of our world. We are naturally moved by the philosophical synopsis of the Grand Moral, by the positive notion of a fundamental Union in all the universe. W.: Bro.: W. Kirk MacNulty, the author of *The Way of the Craftsman*, tells us:

Jointly and separately, these three objects embody and communicate the Law of Unity. [...] The diagram conveys the idea that the entire thing is a Unity, a single, integrated system. This underlying unity has several very important implications. First, since it is a single system, the same laws operate throughout, governing the most powerful archangel and the least mature human being. ... The second implication is that in a single, integrated system events do not happen at random. The apparent unconnected events of our everyday experience do actually form a coherent pattern analogous to the Chequered Pavement even though we may rarely perceive it. [...] All of existence is "a garment without a seam."¹⁰

How affirmative and ennobling is the traditional Masonic understanding of the universe in comparison to the discontinuous and fragmented materialistic viewpoint that has asserted itself in recent centuries. In the view of many in our modern world, Deity no longer occupies the center, and ethics are reduced to little more than arbitrary decisions made without any way of application to the whole. This contemporary alienation from a sense of meaningful connection with the universe can lead to a kind of helplessness in the face of larger questions, to frustrated agnosticism and existential despair — perhaps ultimately to a surrender to moral relativism. Ethics, one of the essential building blocks of traditional philosophy, has in some places become "the stone the builders rejected."¹¹

Moral cynicism dominates not because it has been shown to be correct, nor even because most people truly have come to believe that right and wrong have no existence outside of individual opinion. It is ubiquitous only because it is a necessary corollary of a materialistic worldview that has rejected the very possibility of natural law. It is a symptom of our misplaced priorities.

Masonic tradition, as expressed in our rituals, directs us toward a brighter perspective. Our emblem vividly portrays an interconnected, orderly universe suffused with Divine wisdom and sustenance. We are free to imagine this vital force as merely poetic, or we may understand it as real as gravity, light or electricity. It is more powerful still if we can understand it as an archetypal image, as

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we know some of Preston's contemporaries did. In 1775, for example, William Hutchinson wrote:

Whilst this emblem is before us, we are instructed to boast of nothing;— to have compassion and give aid to those who are in adversity;— to walk uprightly, and with humility;— for such is this existence, that there is no station in which pride can be stably founded:— all men in birth and in the grave are on the level. — Whilst we tread on this MOSAIC WORK, let our ideas return to the original which it copies [the floor of the celestial Grand Lodge — Ed.]; and let every Mason act as the dictates of reason prompt him, TO LIVE IN BROTHERLY LOVE.¹²

Remembering that our lodge Pavement refers to the sacred courtyard stones of Solomon's Temple and to the floor of our idealized "Celestial Lodge Above" opens us to a richer experience of the profound meaning of this symbol. In most Masonic lectures, the candidate is told that the removal of his footwear is due to the lodge floor being "Holy Ground." In the British Emulation working, Masons are informed that "The Square Pavement is for the High Priest to walk upon."¹³

These examples clearly root the Masonic symbolism of the Pavement into the specific context of the Temple of Solomon, which every lodge represents. Our Great Light describes the moment that Temple was completed and dedicated, when it was transformed from a project under construction to a working Temple of the Most High:

All the sons of Israel saw the fire descending—the Glory of the Lord was upon the Temple. They knelt down and prostrated themselves, faces to the ground, upon the mosaic pavement, and praised the Lord, "For He is good and the evidence of His mercy is infinite."¹⁴

Our lodge floor may be seen as a fitting symbol of this moment when the Blazing Star of divine Glory descended from the clouded canopy to the very pavement of the Temple where the builders stood in reverence. It is a snapshot of the moment of the Temple's activation, when it was transformed from a mundane if magnificent work of art into a dwelling of the eternal Presence.

Preston's lecture alludes to the above verse and then adds the intriguing comment that, "Thus we close the ceremony of consecration and dedication of the temple of Jerusalem, in commemoration of which we practice the same rite in the structures which are reared in honor of our art."¹⁵

How can we not be struck by this powerful visual reminder of a Divine Presence dwelling among us? And how can we not be impressed by the infinite scale which our tradition assigns to this geometrical figure? For it has long been taught that:

A Lodge is said, symbolically, to extend in length from east to west; in breadth, from north to south; in height, from the earth to the highest heavens; in depth, from the surface to the center.¹⁶

When we remember the Blazing Star in the center of the Lodge, this Masonic teaching strongly resembles the ancient Hermetic maxim adopted by so many philosophers, that "God is an intelligible sphere, whose center point is everywhere, and whose circumference nowhere."¹⁷ We may stand in awe in contemplation of the Infinite, but more awesome still is the fact that aspects of Infinity are indeed intelligible and may be represented by symbols and referenced by our ritual.

It is no small thing to stand on the level together on the sacrosanct floor of the Lodge. We take it lightly and casually only to the extent that the sacred symbolism beneath our feet is misunderstood

or unnoticed. We are enjoined to treat this floor as hallowed ground, and bearing that in mind, to “subdue every discordant passion within us.” Such passions naturally dissipate as soon as we become conscious of the meanings of the beautiful symbolism present within every Lodge. Furthermore, we are committed to put into daily practice those Masonic insights we have received in private.

We are Masons: we are BUILDERS. It is for us to establish some of those blessings of Divine Wisdom represented by the Tessellated Border. Just as the Lodge extends without limit, there will never be an end to our work.

Let Freemasonry’s basis, its philosophical foundation stone, impress us now, more powerfully than ever. It shines before us, a Blazing Star, a reminder of the reality of that Deity in whom the trust of every worthy Mason is forever placed. As surely as the heat and light of the Sun at high meridian nourishes all life, so the sempiternal star surges with that primal energy that generates and vitalizes the Lodge. May it always shed its rays of illumination upon our beautiful ground plan: an orderly universe unforgotten by its Architect.

NOTES

- 1 Reprinted in D. Knoop, G.P. Jones, & D. Hamer, *Early Masonic Pamphlets* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1945), 192–94.
- 2 Samuel Pritchard, *Masonry Dissected* (London: J. Wilford, 1730), 13.
- 3 Colin Dyer, *Symbolism in Craft Freemasonry* (Hersham, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1976), 89.
- 4 Charles W. Moore & S. W. B. Carnegy, *The Masonic Trestle-Board* (Boston: Charles W. Moore, 1843), 24.
- 5 William Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, act 4, scene 3.
- 6 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, second epistle, lines 205–16.
- 7 *The Complete Workings of Craft Freemasonry* (Lewis Masonic, 1982), 68–69.
- 8 Continental European workings had other influences

working within them around the same time. For example, the Rite of Strict Observance rituals apparently evolved between 1767 and 1772. In the Apprentice lecture of this rite, we are told that the Mosaic pavement and its ornamented border are “a representation of that beauty which, by its regularity, is not far removed from the greatest simplicity.” Alain Bernheim & Arturo deHoyos, “Introduction to the Rituals of the Rite of Strict Observance.” *Heredom* 14 (2006): 76. The Blazing Star is above the Pavement in the Strict Observance tracing board, not integrated into the center of it. In the Apprentice lecture it is described as one of the “hieroglyphs . . . which I cannot, at present, explain to you.” (77) In the Fellow’s degree, more detail is given: “Above you find a Blazing Star, but I am not permitted to give you a complete description of it. So much can be perceived from it, that it excels all else in glory and greatness, so much so that without it we would not be what we really are. Yes, so much so that, in the end, it holds everything united in it that we actually view in the world.” (85) The cryptic style of these definitions likely contributed to the European tendency toward greater abstraction in the interpretation of the Masonic symbols, without any apparent reference to the Prestonian interpretations which are found in various forms under all English-speaking jurisdictions. See, for example, the chapter entitled “The Black and the White” in René Guénon’s *Symbols of Sacred Science* (2004, French original 1962), in which the French theosophist declares that the Mosaic Pavement is an “exact equivalent . . . of the yin-yang” (293) and the essential union of all apparent opposites. One might detect, in the early phases of these two great families of formal elucidations of the symbolism, a hint of an inner consistency or commonality which might indicate the existence of an oral tradition of interpretation, but there is no way to know for certain how much of the ideas of Preston or of the Rite of Strict Observance predated their respective efforts.

- 9 Colin Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 197.
- 10 W. Kirk MacNulty, *The Way of the Craftsman* (London: Central Regalia, 2002), 49–50.
- 11 Psalm 118:22.
- 12 William Hutchinson, *The Spirit of Masonry* (London: J. Wilkie, 1775), 114–15.
- 13 *Complete Workings*, 291.

- Collected *Prestonian Lectures, 1925–1960*, ed. Harry Carr (London: Quatuor Coronati, 1965), 2.
2. This sketch of Preston's early life is attributed to Stephen Jones and was originally published under title of "Memoirs of Mr. William Preston, Past Master of the Lodge of Antiquity, No. 1," *The Freemason's Magazine or General and Complete Library* 4 (1795), 2–9.
 3. *Ibid.*, 6.
 4. William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry* (London: J. Williams, 1772), xx–xxi.
 5. Preston included a complete description and record of the Gala itself in his first edition of the *Illustrations of Masonry* (pp. 1–51).
 6. P. R. James, "The Lectures of English Craft Freemasonry." *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 79 (1965): 142.
 7. Colin Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 31.
 8. Hills, "Brother William Preston," 11.
 9. *Ibid.*, 12.
 10. *Ibid.*, 13.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. Dyer, *William Preston*, 160.
 13. James, "Lectures," 143.
 14. See Dyer's notes in his Appendix of *William Preston and His Work* regarding the dating of various printed manuscripts of the Syllabus Books.
 15. P. R. James, "The First Lecture of Free Masonry by William Preston." *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 82 (1968): 147–48.
 16. Dyer, *William Preston*, 160.

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- 14 2 Chronicles 7:3. The Hebrew word *ritzfah* (רִצְפָּה) means "stone pavement, flagstone floor, mosaic floor." (Koebler & Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*). The specific appearance or materials of a *ritzfah* can vary. For example, in Esther 1:6 it describes a palace floor where the elements of the mosaic were of marble, porphyry and mother-of-pearl. It is interesting that the early Masons were perhaps aware that the Hebrew Bible mentions a mosaic pavement as part of Solomon's Temple, because the common English versions such as the 1560 Geneva Bible and the 1611 King James Bible simply read "the pavement."
- 15 Dyer, *William Preston*, 241 (emphasis added).
- 16 This is a common Masonic instruction, cited in this instance from Albert G. Mackey, *A Manual of the Lodge* (New York: E. Maynard & Co, 1870), p. 44.
- 17 *Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam.* — *Corpus Hermeticum, Liber 24 Philosophorum.*

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jealousy or risk of ego crisis."⁷ He's only concerned with who can best work and best agree; he can truly rejoice in another's prosperity, and promote the welfare of his fellow man.

NOTES

1. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 32–33.
2. John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819).
3. Rabbi Noah Weinberg, *48 Ways to Wisdom*. Website: <http://www.aish.com/sp/48w/48966236.html>
4. *Ibid.*
5. Emilie Cady, *Lessons in Truth* (Kansas City, MO: Unity, 1919), 150.
6. Weinberg, *op. cit.*
7. *Ibid.*

COMING SOON IN PHILALETHERS

Tom Worrel continues his series on the Liberal Arts and Sciences with an exploration of the classical Art of Memory • Shawn Eyer addresses Dan Brown's novel *The Lost Symbol* and its implications for Freemasons • guidance on writing Masonic papers • book reviews • and more