

HIRAM ABIFF

Meridian Lodge No. 687

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The word “Abif” has in one way or another caused considerable controversy among both Biblical and Masonic scholars. 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 it 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.

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.”

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.”

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.

We are informed that Hiram Abif was 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! The Temple 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. 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.

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