

The Rite of Investiture

by Wayne Anderson

Another ritualistic symbolism, of still more importance and interest, is the rite of investiture. The rite of investiture, called, in the colloquially technical language of the order, the ceremony of clothing, brings us at once to the consideration of that well-known symbol of Freemasonry, the LAMBSKIN APRON. This rite of investiture, or the placing upon the aspirant some garment, as an indication of his appropriate preparation for the ceremonies in which he was about to engage, prevailed in all the ancient initiations. A few of them only it will be requisite to consider.

1. Thus in the Levitical economy of the Israelites the priests always wore the abnet, or linen apron, or girdle, as a part of the investiture of the priesthood. This, with the other garments, was to be worn, as the text expresses it, "for glory and for beauty," or, as it has been explained by a learned commentator, "as emblematical of that holiness and purity which ever characterize the divine nature, and the worship which is worthy of him."

2. In the Persian Mysteries of Mithras, the candidate, having first received light, was invested with a girdle, a crown or mitre, a purple tunic, and, lastly, a white apron.

3. In the initiations practised in Hindostan, in the ceremony of investiture was substituted the sash, or sacred zennaar, consisting of a cord, composed of nine threads twisted into a knot at the end, and hanging from the left shoulder to the right hip. This was, perhaps, the type of the masonic scarf, which is, or ought to be, always worn in the same position.

4. The Jewish sect of the Essenes, who approached nearer than any other secret institution of antiquity to Freemasonry in their organization, always invested their novices with a white robe.

5. And, lastly, in the Scandinavian rites, where the military genius of the people had introduced a warlike species of initiation, instead of the apron we find the candidate receiving a white shield, which was, however, always presented with the accompaniment of some symbolic instruction, not very dissimilar to that which is connected with the masonic apron.

In all these modes of investiture, no matter what was the material or the form, the symbolic signification intended to be conveyed was that of purity. And hence, in Freemasonry, the same symbolism is communicated by the apron, which, because it is the first gift which the aspirant receives,--the first symbol in which he is instructed,--has been called the "badge of a mason." And most appropriately has it been so called; for, whatever may be the future advancement of the candidate in the "Royal Art," into whatever deeper arcana his devotion to the mystic institution or his thirst for knowledge may carry him, with the apron--his first investiture--he never parts. Changing, perhaps, its form and its decorations, and conveying at each step some new and beautiful allusion, its substance is still there, and it continues to claim the honourable title by which it was first made known to him on the night of his initiation. The apron derives its significance, as the symbol of purity, from two sources--from its colour and from its material. In each of these points of view it is, then, to be considered, before its symbolism can be properly appreciated.

And, first, the colour of the apron must be an unspotted white. This colour has, in all ages, been esteemed an emblem of innocence and purity. It was with reference to this symbolism that a portion of the vestments of the Jewish priesthood was directed to be made white. And hence Aaron was commanded, when he entered into the holy of holies to make an expiation for the sins of the people, to appear clothed in white linen, with his linen apron, or girdle, about his loins. It is worthy of remark that the Hebrew word LABAN, which signifies to make white, denotes also to purify; and hence we find, throughout the Scriptures, many allusions to that colour as an emblem of purity. "Though thy sins be as scarlet," says Isaiah, "they shall be white as snow;" and Jeremiah, in describing the once innocent condition of Zion, says, "Her Nazarites were purer than snow; they were whiter than milk."

In the Apocalypse, a white stone was the reward promised by the Spirit to those who overcame; and in the same mystical book the apostle is instructed to say, that fine linen, clean and white, is the righteousness of the saints. In the early ages of the Christian church a white garment was always placed upon the catechumen who had been recently baptized, to denote that he had been cleansed from his former sins, and was thenceforth to lead a life of innocence and purity. Hence it was presented to him with this appropriate charge: "Receive the white and undefiled garment, and produce it unspotted before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you may

obtain immortal life." The white alb still constitutes a part of the vestments of the Roman church, and its colour is said by Bishop England "to excite to piety by teaching us the purity of heart and body which we should possess in being present at the holy mysteries."

The heathens paid the same attention to the symbolic signification of this colour. The Egyptians, for instance, decorated the head of their principal deity, Osiris, with a white tiara, and the priests wore robes of the whitest linen. In the school of Pythagoras, the sacred hymns were chanted by the disciples clothed in garments of white. The Druids gave white vestments to those of their initiates who had arrived at the ultimate degree, or that of perfection. And this was intended, according to their ritual, to teach the aspirant that none were admitted to that honour but such as were cleansed from all impurities, both of body and mind. In all the Mysteries and religions rites of the other nations of antiquity the same use of white garments was observed.

Portal, in his "Treatise on Symbolic Colours," says that "white, the symbol of the divinity and of the priesthood, represents divine wisdom; applied to a young girl, it denotes virginity; to an accused person, innocence; to a judge, justice;" and he adds--what in reference to its use in Masonry will be peculiarly appropriate--that, "as a characteristic sign of purity, it exhibits a promise of hope after death." We see, therefore, the propriety of adopting this colour in the masonic system as a symbol of purity. This symbolism pervades the whole of the ritual, from the lowest to the highest degree, wherever white vestments or white decorations are used.

As to the material of the apron, this is imperatively required to be of lambskin. No other substance, such as linen, silk, or satin, could be substituted without entirely destroying the symbolism of the vestment. Now, the lamb has, as the ritual expresses it, "been, in all ages, deemed an emblem of innocence;" but more particularly in the Jewish and Christian churches has this symbolism been observed. Instances of this need hardly be cited. They abound throughout the Old Testament, where we learn that a lamb was selected by the Israelites for their sin and burnt offerings, and in the New, where the word lamb is almost constantly employed as synonymous with innocence. "The paschal lamb," says Didron, "which was eaten by the Israelites on the night preceding their departure, is the type of that other divine Lamb, of whom Christians are to partake at Easter, in order thereby to free themselves from the bondage in which they are held by vice. " The paschal lamb, a lamb bearing a cross, was, therefore, from an early period, depicted by the Christians as referring to Christ crucified, "that spotless Lamb of God, who was slain from the foundation of the world." The material, then, of the apron, unites with its colour to give to the investiture of a mason the symbolic signification of purity. This, then, together with the fact which I have already shown, that the ceremony of investiture was common to all the ancient religious rites, will form another proof of the identity of origin between these and the masonic institution.

This symbolism also indicates the sacred and religious character which its founders sought to impose upon Freemasonry, and to which both the moral and physical qualifications of our candidates undoubtedly have a reference, since it is with the masonic lodge as it was with the Jewish church, where it was declared that "no man that had a blemish should come nigh unto the altar;" and with the heathen priesthood, among whom we are told that it was thought to be a dishonor to the gods to be served by any one that was maimed, lame, or in any other way imperfect; and with both, also, in requiring that no one should approach the sacred things who was not pure and uncorrupt.

The pure, unspotted lambskin apron is, then, in Masonry, symbolic of that perfection of body and purity of mind which are essential qualifications in all who would participate in its sacred mysteries.