

# The Sprig of Acacia or Evergreen

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Intimately connected with the legend of the third degree is the mythical history of the Sprig of Acacia, which we are now to consider. There is no symbol more interesting to the masonic student than the Sprig of Acacia, not only on account of its own peculiar import, but also because it introduces us to an extensive and delightful field of research; that, namely, which embraces the symbolism of sacred plants. In all the ancient systems of religion, and Mysteries of initiation, there was always some one plant consecrated, in the minds of the worshippers and participants, by a peculiar symbolism, and therefore held in extraordinary veneration as a sacred emblem. Thus the ivy was used in the Mysteries of Dionysus, the myrtle in those of Ceres, the erica in the Osirian, and the lettuce in the Adonisian. But to this subject I shall have occasion to refer more fully in a subsequent part of the present investigation.

Before entering upon an examination of the symbolism of the Acacia, it will be, perhaps, as well to identify the true plant which occupies so important a place in the ritual of Freemasonry.

*And here, in passing, I may be permitted to say that it is a very great error to designate the symbolic plant of Masonry by the name of "Cassia"--an error which undoubtedly arose, originally, from the very common habit among illiterate people of sinking the sound of the letter a in the pronunciation of any word of which it constitutes the initial syllable. Just, for instance, as we constantly hear, in the conversation of the uneducated, the words pothecary and prentice for apothecary and apprentice, shall we also find cassia used for acacia. Unfortunately, however, this corruption of acacia into cassia has not always been confined to the illiterate: but the long employment of the corrupted form has at length introduced it, in some instances, among a few of our writers. Even the venerable Oliver, although well acquainted with the symbolism of the acacia, and having written most learnedly upon it, has, at times, allowed himself to use the objectionable corruption, unwittingly influenced, in all probability, by the too frequent adoption of the latter word in the English lodges. In America, but few Masons fall into the error of speaking of the Cassia. The proper teaching of the Acacia is here well understood.*

The cassia of the ancients was, in fact, an ignoble plant having no mystic meaning and no sacred character, and was never elevated to a higher function than that of being united, as Virgil informs us, with other odorous herbs in the formation of a garland:--

*"...violets pale,  
The poppy's flush, and dill which scents the gale,  
Cassia, and hyacinth, and daffodil,  
With yellow marigold the chaplet fill."*

Alston says that the "*Cassia lignea of the ancients was the larger branches of the cinnamon tree, cut off with their bark and sent together to the druggists; their Cassia fistula, or Syrinx, was the same cinnamon in the bark only;*" but Ruæus says that it also sometimes denoted the lavender, and sometimes the rosemary.

In Scripture the cassia is only three times mentioned, twice as the translation of the Hebrew word kiddak, and once as the rendering of ketziath, but always as referring to an aromatic plant which formed a constituent portion of some perfume. There is, indeed, strong reason for believing that the cassia is only another name for a coarser preparation of cinnamon, and it is also to be remarked that it did not grow in Palestine, but was imported from the East. The acacia, on the contrary, was esteemed a sacred tree. It is the acacia vera of Tournefort, and the mimosa nilotica of Linnæus. It grew abundantly in the vicinity of Jerusalem, where it is still to be found, and is familiar to us all, in its modern uses at least, as the tree from which the gum arabic of commerce is obtained.

The acacia, which, in Scripture, is always called shittah, and in the plural shittim, was esteemed a sacred wood among the Hebrews. Of it Moses was ordered to make the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the table for the showbread, and the rest of the sacred furniture. Isaiah, in recounting the promises of God's mercy to the Israelites on their return from the captivity, tells them, that, among other things, he will plant in the wilderness, for their relief and refreshment, the cedar, the acacia (or, as it is rendered in our common version, the shittah), the fir, and other trees. The first thing, then, that we notice in this symbol of the acacia, is, that it had been always consecrated from among the other trees of the forest by the sacred purposes to which it was devoted. By the Jew the tree from whose wood the sanctuary of the tabernacle and the holy ark had been constructed would ever be viewed as more sacred than ordinary trees. The early Masons, therefore, very naturally appropriated this hallowed plant to the equally sacred purpose of a symbol which was to teach an important divine truth in all ages to come.

Having thus briefly disposed of the natural history of this plant, we may now proceed to examine it in its symbolic relations.

**First.** The acacia, in the mythic system of Freemasonry, is preeminently the symbol of the IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL, that important doctrine which it is the great design of the institution to teach. As the evanescent nature of the flower which "cometh forth and is cut down" reminds us of the transitory nature of human life, so the perpetual renovation of the evergreen plant, which uninterruptedly presents the appearance of youth and vigor, is aptly compared to that spiritual life in which the soul, freed from the corruptible companionship of the body, shall enjoy an eternal spring and an immortal youth. Hence, in the impressive funeral service of our order, it is said, "*This evergreen is an emblem of our faith in the immortality of the soul. By this we are reminded that we have an immortal part within us, which shall survive the grave, and which shall never, never, never die.*" And again, in the closing sentences of the monitorial lecture of the Third Degree, the same sentiment is repeated, and we are told that by "*the ever green and ever living sprig*" the Mason is strengthened "*with confidence and composure to look forward to a blessed immortality.*" Such an interpretation of the symbol is an easy and a natural one; it suggests itself at once to the least reflective mind, and consequently, in some one form or

another, is to be found existing in all ages and nations. It was an ancient custom, which is not, even now, altogether disused, for mourners to carry in their hands at funerals a sprig of some evergreen, generally the cedar or the cypress, and to deposit it in the grave of the deceased. According to Dalcho, the Hebrews always planted a sprig of the acacia at the head of the grave of a departed friend. Potter tells us that the ancient Greeks "had a custom of bedecking tombs with herbs and flowers." All sorts of purple and white flowers were acceptable to the dead, but principally the amaranth and the myrtle. The very name of the former of these plants, which signifies "never fading," would seem to indicate the true symbolic meaning of the usage, although archaeologists have generally supposed it to be simply an exhibition of love on the part of the survivors. Ragon says, that the ancients substituted the acacia for all other plants because they believed it to be incorruptible, and not liable to injury from the attacks of any kind of insect or other animal--thus symbolizing the incorruptible nature of the soul.

Hence we see the propriety of placing the sprig of acacia, as an emblem of immortality, among the symbols of that degree, all of whose ceremonies are intended to teach us the great truth, that "*the life of man, regulated by morality, faith, and justice, will be rewarded at its closing hour by the prospect of eternal bliss.*" So, therefore, says Dr. Oliver, when the Master Mason exclaims, "My name is Acacia," it is equivalent to saying, "I have been in the grave; I have triumphed over it by rising from the dead, and being regenerated in the process, I have a claim to life everlasting."

The sprig of acacia, then, in its most ordinary signification, presents itself to the Master Mason as a symbol of the immortality of the soul, being intended to remind him, by its evergreen and unchanging nature, of that better and spiritual part within us, which, as an emanation from the Grand Architect of the Universe, can never die. And as this is the most ordinary, the most generally accepted signification, so also is it the most important; for thus, as the peculiar symbol of immortality, it becomes the most appropriate to an order all of whose teachings are intended to inculcate the great lesson that "life rises out of the grave." But incidental to this the acacia has two other interpretations, which are well worthy of investigation.

**Secondly**, then, the acacia is a symbol of INNOCENCE. The symbolism here is of a peculiar and unusual character, depending not on any real analogy in the form or use of the symbol to the idea symbolized, but simply on a double or compound meaning of the word. For *akakia*, in the Greek language, signifies both the plant in question and the moral quality of innocence or purity of life. In this sense the symbol refers, primarily, to him over whose solitary grave the acacia was planted, and whose virtuous conduct, whose integrity of life and fidelity to his trusts, have ever been presented as patterns to the craft, and consequently to all Master Masons, who, by this interpretation of the symbol, are invited to emulate his example.

Hutchinson, indulging in his favorite theory of Christianizing Masonry, when he comes to this signification of the symbol, thus enlarges on the interpretation: "We Masons, describing the deplorable estate of religion under the Jewish law, speak in figures: 'Her tomb was in the rubbish and filth cast forth of the temple, and Acacia wove its branches over her monument;' *akakia* being the Greek word for innocence, or being free from sin; implying that the sins and corruptions of the old law and devotees of the Jewish altar had hid Religion from those who sought her, and she was only to be found where innocence survived, and under the banner of the divine Lamb; and as to ourselves, professing that we were to be distinguished by our *Acacy*, or as true *Acacians* in our religious faith and tenets."

Among the nations of antiquity, it was common thus by peculiar plants to symbolize the virtues and other qualities of the mind. In many instances the symbolism has been lost to the moderns, but in others it has been retained, and is well understood, even at the present day. Thus the olive was adopted as the symbol of peace, because, says Lee, "its oil is very useful, in some way or other, in all arts manual which principally flourish in times of peace." The quince among the Greeks was the symbol of love and happiness; and hence, by the laws of Solon, in Athenian marriages, the bride and bridegroom were required to eat a quince together. The palm was the symbol of victory; and hence, in the catacombs of Rome, the burial-place of so many of the early Christians, the palm leaf is constantly found as an emblem of the Christian's triumph over sin and death. The rosemary was a symbol of remembrance, and hence was used both at marriages and at funerals, the memory of the past being equally appropriate in both rites. The parsley was consecrated to grief; and hence all the Greeks decked their tombs with it; and it was used to crown the conquerors in the Nemean games, which were of a funereal character. But it is needless to multiply instances of this symbolism. In adopting the acacia as a symbol of innocence, Masonry has but extended the principle of an ancient and universal usage, which thus consecrated particular plants, by a mystical meaning, to the representation of particular virtues.

But **lastly**, the acacia is to be considered as the symbol of INITIATION. This is by far the most interesting of its interpretations, and was, we have every reason to believe, the primary and original, the others being but incidental. It leads us at once to the investigation of that significant fact to which I have already alluded, that in all the ancient initiations and religious mysteries there was some plant, peculiar to each, which was consecrated by its own esoteric meaning, and which occupied an important position in the celebration of the rites; so that the plant, whatever it might be, from its constant and prominent use in the ceremonies of initiation, came at length to be adopted as the symbol of that initiation.

A reference to some of these sacred plants, for such was the character they assumed, and an investigation of their symbolism will not, perhaps, be uninteresting or useless, in connection with the subject of the present article. In the Mysteries of Adonis, which originated in Phoenicia, and were afterwards transferred to Greece, the death and resurrection of Adonis was represented. A part of the legend accompanying these mysteries was, that when Adonis was slain by a wild boar, Venus laid out the body on a bed of lettuce. In memorial of this supposed fact, on the first day of the celebration, when funeral rites were performed, lettuces were carried in the procession, newly planted in shells of earth. Hence the lettuce became the sacred plant of the Adonia, or Adonian Mysteries.

The lotus was the sacred plant of the Brahminical rites of India, and was considered as the symbol of their elemental trinity, earth,

water, and air, because, as an aquatic plant, it derived its nutriment from all of these elements combined, its roots being planted in the earth, its stem rising through the water, and its leaves exposed to the air. The Egyptians, who borrowed a large portion of their religious rites from the East, adopted the lotus, which was also indigenous to their country, as a mystical plant, and made it the symbol of their initiation, or the birth into celestial light. Hence, as Champollion observes, they often on their monuments represented the god Phre, or the sun, as borne within the expanded calyx of the lotus. The lotus bears a flower similar to that of the poppy, while its large, tongue-shaped leaves float upon the surface of the water. As the Egyptians had remarked that the plant expands when the sun rises, and closes when it sets, they adopted it as a symbol of the sun; and as that luminary was the principal object of the popular worship, the lotus became in all their sacred rites a consecrated and mystical plant. The Egyptians also selected the erica, or heath, as a sacred plant. The origin of the consecration of this plant presents us with a singular coincidence, that will be peculiarly interesting to the masonic student. We are informed that there was a legend in the mysteries of Osiris, which related, that Isis, when in search of the body of her murdered husband, discovered it interred at the brow of a hill, near which an erica, or heath plant, grew; and hence, after the recovery of the body and the resurrection of the god, when she established the mysteries to commemorate her loss and her recovery, she adopted the erica, as a sacred plant, in memory of its having pointed out the spot where the mangled remains of Osiris were concealed.

The mistletoe was the sacred plant of Druidism. Its consecrated character was derived from a legend of the Scandinavian mythology, and which is thus related in the Edda, or sacred books. The god Balder, the son of Odin, having dreamed that he was in some great danger of life, his mother, Friga, exacted an oath from all the creatures of the animal, the vegetable, and the mineral kingdoms, that they would do no harm to her son. The mistletoe, contemptible from its size and weakness, was alone neglected, and of it no oath of immunity was demanded. Lok, the evil genius, or god of Darkness, becoming acquainted with this fact, placed an arrow made of mistletoe in the hands of Holder, the blind brother of Balder, on a certain day, when the gods were throwing missiles at him in sport, and wondering at their inability to do him injury with any arms with which they could attack him. But, being shot with the mistletoe arrow, it inflicted a fatal wound, and Balder died. Ever afterwards the mistletoe was revered as a sacred plant, consecrated to the powers of darkness; and annually it became an important rite among the Druids to proceed into the forest in search of the mistletoe, which, being found, was cut down by the Arch Druid, and its parts, after a solemn sacrifice, were distributed among the people. Clavel very ingeniously remarks, that it is evident, in reference to the legend, that as Balder symbolizes the Sun-god, and Lok, Darkness, this search for the mistletoe was intended to deprive the god of Darkness of the power of destroying the god of Light. And the distribution of the fragments of the mistletoe among their pious worshippers, was to assure them that henceforth a similar attempt of Lok would prove abortive, and he was thus deprived of the means of effecting his design.

The myrtle performed the same office of symbolism in the Mysteries of Greece as the lotus did in Egypt, or the mistletoe among the Druids. The candidate, in these initiations, was crowned with myrtle, because, according to the popular theology, the myrtle was sacred to Proserpine, the goddess of the future life. Every classical scholar will remember the golden branch with which Aeneas was supplied by the Sibyl, before proceeding on his journey to the infernal regions, a voyage which is now universally admitted to be a mythical representation of the ceremonies of initiation.

In all of these ancient Mysteries, while the sacred plant was a symbol of initiation, the initiation itself was symbolic of the resurrection to a future life, and of the immortality of the soul. In this view, Freemasonry is to us now in the place of the ancient initiations, and the acacia is substituted for the lotus, the erica, the ivy, the mistletoe, and the myrtle. The lesson of wisdom is the same; the medium of imparting it is all that has been changed. Returning, then, to the acacia, we find that it is capable of three explanations. It is a symbol of immortality, of innocence, and of initiation. But these three significations are closely connected, and that connection must be observed, if we desire to obtain a just interpretation of the symbol. Thus, in this one symbol, we are taught that in the initiation of life, of which the initiation in the third-degree is simply emblematic, innocence must for a time lie in the grave, at length, however, to be called, by the word of the Grand Master of the Universe, to a blissful immortality. Combine with this the recollection of the place where the sprig of acacia was planted, and which I have heretofore shown to be Mount Calvary, the place of sepulture of Him who "brought life and immortality to light," and who, in Christian Masonry, is designated, as he is in Scripture, as "the lion of the tribe of Judah," and remember, too, that in the mystery of his death, the wood of the cross takes the place of the acacia, and in this little and apparently insignificant symbol, but which is really and truly the most important and significant one in masonic science, we have a beautiful suggestion of all the mysteries of life and death, of time and eternity, of the present and of the future. Thus read (and thus all our symbols should be read), Masonry proves something more to its disciples than a mere social society or a charitable association. It becomes a "lamp to our feet," whose spiritual light shines on the darkness of the deathbed, and dissipates the gloomy shadows of the grave.