

ACACIA

THE SACRED THORN TREE

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ACACIA: THE SACRED THORN TREE

It is, lastly, a symbol of initiation... This symbolism is derived from the fact that it is the sacred plant of Masonry; and in all the ancient rites there were sacred plants, which became in each rite the respective symbol of initiation into its Mysteries; hence the idea was borrowed by Freemasonry.¹
(Mackey)

In all of the dissection of meanings in the Third Degree, one humble plant silently stands out in its contribution to the meaning of that experience: the sprig of acacia. It is worth taking some time to examine this both from a symbolic and an ethnobotanical perspective. If it was important enough to put in the degree, we owe it to ourselves to unravel the reasons for why it manifests in that pivotal scene in the desert.

As we all know from having been through the sublime experience, the Master Hiram Abiff is murdered by ruffians and his body placed in a trash heap. At low twelve, they meet again and determine to carry the body out into the desert, where it is placed in a hastily-dug grave. They insert a sprig of acacia into the earth – at the head of the grave - to mark the spot and plot to make their escape from the crime. Later, one of the Fellow Crafts who has been sent to search for the Master attempts to use it to help him rise from his rest and in so doing pulls it from the ground, leading to the discovery of Hiram Abiff's body.

That is the story from the Monitor. We've all been through it and many times have had to bring out the little plastic prop that represents the Acacia and place it on the Lodge room floor.

By virtue of our participation in a Traditional Observance Lodge, we are no strangers to the symbolic density of our rituals. Every item has a meaning; often, multiple and layered. What, then, is the point of the acacia? What did the founders intend when they crafted the Master Mason degree and put this seemingly innocuous shrub in such an interesting place? It is a marker and a signpost in the degree, and indeed it points to many deeper possibilities if we only take the time to look.

What is acacia? Would most of us know it if we tripped over it?

A quick visit to Wikipedia points out there are over 1300 species of acacia around the world, with a bit over two-thirds native to Australia (where it is known as a "wattle"), and the remainder spread throughout the rest of the planet, including the Americas. A superficial investigation reveals a tremendous diversity between the species and many contradictory associations among them; we should be clear on which acacia we reference.

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Bro. Nigel Brown, in a paper before the Quator Coronati Lodge in 1991, asserted that the plant so identified in the third degree was most likely not even acacia at all, but cassia.ⁱⁱ Manly P. Hall thinks it is the same as a tamarisk, which is a separate genus in the confusing and often overlapping families of *Mimosa*, *Tamarix* and *Acacia*. Mackey declares it to be *Acacia nilotica*, a thorny tree well-dispersed throughout the Middle East and more specifically in the areas depicted in the ritual; to further confuse things, Mackey's *A. nilotica* in fact is often crosslisted as, or replaced by, *Mimosa nilotica*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Let us look at some of the competing theories and see if they provide any further clues.

Mackey's identification in *Symbolism of Freemasonry* describes a "never fading evergreen", noting its connection to immortality in Judaic thought. It also stands for initiation and innocence. He points out that *Acacia* is distinct from *Cassia*, as was often asserted at the time, and one must not fall into the trap of confusing them; cassia is "an ignoble plant", worthy of only three passing mentions in the Old Testament, whereas acacia, called *Shittim*, is noted as the sacred wood used to build the Ark of the Covenant and the shewbread table as well as the all of the holy furniture within the Tabernacle.^{iv} Some also believe that the "burning bush" of Exodus 3 was in fact acacia.^v A Web Site that specializes in biblical flora will even sell you seeds for acacia labeled *Shittim*, though it lists the species as *A. tortilis*.^{vi}

Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* considers the acacia to be synonymous with tamarisk.^{vii} There is a curious reference to tamarisk in I Samuel 31:11-13 that should catch the ear of any Master Mason:

(11) When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, (12) all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. (13) Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

The crown of thorns placed atop Jesus' head during the Crucifixion is also reputed to be made of acacia.^{viii} Again, in parallel with what we see in Saul's burial beneath the tamarisk, we find the sacred plant at the head of the figure either dead or dying, often in the context of some heroic trial.

The symbolism of the acacia are not restricted to Judeo-Christian paradigms. There are further references to Egyptian mythology in connection with our thorny tree in the Short Talk Bulletin, a Masonic paper from 1932:

Apparently the beginning of the association of the acacia with immortality is in the legend of Isis and Osiris, one of the oldest myths of mankind, traced back into Egypt many

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thousands of years before the Christian era. Its beginnings, like those of all legends which have endured, are shrouded in the mist which draws a veil between us and the days before history.

According to the legend, Osiris, who was at once both King and God of the Egyptians, and was tricked by his brother Typhon (who was very jealous of Osiris), during the King's absence on a beneficent mission to his people. Later, at a feast provided for the King-God's pleasure, Typhon brought a large chest, beautiful in workmanship, valuable in the extreme, and offered it as a gift to whoever possessed a body which best fitted the chest. When Osiris entered the box, Typhon caused the lid to shut and fastened; after which the whole was thrown into the Nile.

Currents carried it to Byblos, Phoenicia, and cast it ashore at the foot of an acacia tree. The tree grew rapidly and soon encased the chest holding the body of Osiris.

When Isis, faithful queen, learned of the fate of her husband she set out in search of the body. Meanwhile the King of the Land where the acacia concealed the body, admiring the tree's beauty, cut it down and made of its trunk, a column. Learning this, Isis became nurse to the King's children and received the column as her pay. In the tree trunk, preserved, was the body of Osiris. During their long captivity at the hands of the Egyptians; what more natural than that the Israelites should take for their own a symbol already old, and make of the "Shittah-Tree" a symbol of immortality, just as had been done in Egypt? ^{ix}

The venerable Albert Pike refers to acacia in connection with one of the three daughters of pre-Islamic Allah, the southern Arabian goddess of fertility and analogue to Venus, *al Uzza*. This goddess reputedly lived among a stand of sacred acacias near Makkah according to the Nabataeans, who also venerated acacia and made idols of the wood. ^x

Let's examine some of the possibilities of the plant most commonly associated with acacia: *A. nilotica*.

In Asia, *A. nilotica* is known as *babul* (though this name can refer in practice to a few different species). Virtually every part of the tree can be used for either fuel, food or medicine.

A few examples:

- Its seed pods are widely used as a dye and medicine, ^{xi}
- The wood and bark are used for fuel, ^{xii}

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- The gum that exudes from acacia is bloody red and provides another symbolic link,^{XIII}
- The Masai use it as an intoxicant and in extreme doses as an aphrodisiac;^{XIV}
- the wood and bark are burned for heat and used for timber;
- The bark and gum are used for incense;
- The seeds are useful in men's health problems,^{XV}
- In Indian Ayurvedic practice it is used as a clotting agent and is useful in mitigating gastrointestinal disorders and infections.^{XVI}

This brings us to another, highly unexplored topic: the ethnopharmacological possibilities of acacia. Benny Shanon, a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, speculated in the journal */Time and Mind/* that acacia could have been used for the induction of religious trances, owing to the fact it contains substances well-known to researchers. Botanical compounds within some kinds of acacia can elicit powerful effects, including an altered perception of the flow of time, blurred physical sensations, and profound religious feelings.^{XVII}

Professor Shanon also notes the curious co-location of acacia with another very common plant in the region, Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*). This plant, which figures significantly in the pre-Judaic mythologies and spiritual practices of the area (for example, among the “evil eye” charms of Bedouin women)^{XVIII}, possesses compounds that, when combined with the acacia, are analogous to the sacred drink Ayahuasca, which has been used by South American Indians for thousands of years in shamanic practices.^{XIX}

While Shanon's work is speculative, it provides a fascinating viewpoint into the potential commonalities between the entheogenic practices of vastly different communities widely separated by geography.

As we have discussed, the humble Acacia sprig in the Third Degree ritual has a presence beyond its mere appearance. Our investigations have shown that far from being a simple plant, it has associations with virtually every major spiritual practice in Asia and North Africa and one is hard-pressed to specifically identify a specific species or even genus between the manifestations considered holy by practitioners throughout the region. It also has many practical uses, from food to textiles to folk medicine, and serves several roles in holy endeavors, including furniture for temples and incense made from its seed pods and bark. Regardless of which individual interpretation we may focus on in our exegesis, the fact remains that with so many attributions and uses from this thorn-tree, we must acknowledge its pivotal role as a signpost in the ways of the sacred.

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END NOTES

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