

Defining Esotericism from a Masonic Perspective

Shawn Eyer, P.:M.:

It is not he who has a parrot-like perfection in ritual as his sole qualification, but rather the one who, so far as time and means and talent will allow, devotes study to the deeper esotery of the fraternity.—Joseph E. Morcombe, Chairman, Grand Lodge of Iowa Masonic Library, 1901¹

Esotericism: the mention of the word fills the minds of some with notions of beautiful and ancient truths, and inspires them with curiosity about the inner meaning of the Craft. For others, the term brings to mind unpleasant and tiresome lectures awash in insipid, unlikely and artificial interpretations of Masonry. And for most, it's a word that is only semi-familiar, having something to do vaguely with mysticism and Masonic secrets.

Although definition of the word “esoteric” has been somewhat unclear, it seems that general interest in esotericism is growing. Brethren who are fortunate to belong to growing lodges have likely spoken with recent candidates who readily express interest in Masonry's esoteric and philosophical explanations. Suddenly, an element of Masonic life that had been relegated to the margins is coming back into view.

Of course, this leaves Masonic leaders—at least, those who do not wish to ignore this important rekindling of interest—with the challenge of obtaining some understanding of it, both in order to relate meaningfully to the motivations of these newer members, as well as to include these interests in lodge education and Masonic formation efforts as may be appropriate. The purpose here is to lend definition to the term, particularly as it can relate to Freemasonry.

This article is a summary of a more comprehensive treatment which will appear in volume 1 of *Ahiman: A Review of Masonic Arts & Letters* (ISBN 978-1-60302-365-8).

1 Joseph E. Morcombe, “Grand Lodge of Iowa Library Committee Report,” *Annals of the Grand Lodge of Iowa* 17 (1900–01): 146.

What is Masonic Esotericism?

The word “esoteric” by itself simply means something which is understood only by a select or chosen inner group. Things like automotive repair or tax law might be called esoteric. Freemasons have used the word in a different and more traditional sense. It turns out that esotericism is nothing new. The word itself comes to us from the Greek word *esôterikos* (ἔσωτερικός), “inner thing,” and is found in many ancient writings to refer to the inner teachings of a philosophical or spiritual group.

Freemasons have historically used the term in three ways, denoting:

1. Any of the elements of the Masonic ritual or lectures which are considered secret (i.e., matters reserved for the confines of a tiled lodge, or material that is not “monitorial,” as American Masons might say).

2. Any of the meanings which seem to be implicit, more by design than accident, within the Masonic symbolism, ritual and lectures.

3. Any of the subjects generally included under the rubric of “Western Esotericism,” including kabbalah, alchemy, hermeticism and other mystical pursuits which gained in popularity during the Renaissance period.

Considering each of these in a little more detail will allow us to shed valuable light on the topic, and give us some ideas as to how to foster responsible explorations of esoteric matters in the future.

I. *The Esoteric as Private*

... that hieroglyphic bright,
which none but craftsmen ever saw.—Burns

In the first sense, the word esoteric is used in a somewhat constrained way to refer to those elements of Masonic work which are not for display outside a tiled lodge. In this definition “esoteric” is a *condition*, denoting private circumstances. It is the intended *location* of something, rather than its content, which

makes it esoteric from this perspective. Of course, the implication is clearly that the things reserved for private communication are so regarded because of their importance.

For example, one of the earliest usages of the term *esôterikos* in reference to spiritual tradition is in the essay *On the Pythagorean Life* by Iamblichus (250–325 CE), where it is said that the students in the Pythagorean school at first had to listen to their master from behind a veil. Those who passed the probationary period were called *esôterikoi*, and permitted to sit within the veil and see Pythagoras as he taught them.² William Preston, the predominant author of the lectures used in American Freemasonry, refers to this portion of Iamblichus' text directly when he noted in 1801 that the ancient teacher "divided them into the esoteric and exoteric classes: to the former he intrusted the more sublime and secret doctrines, to the latter the more simple and popular."³ This is one of the earliest Masonic uses of the term esoteric, and it informed how later Masonic writers would conceive of the notion. Of course, also an early example of the word "exoteric," meaning "those outside."

This simple meaning of "esoteric" as relating to privileged information for members only become widely adopted throughout the fraternity: it is in this fundamental sense that the term is commonly used in Grand Lodge regulations today.

2 *On the Pythagorean Life* 17.72. The word "esoterick" entered the English language in 1701 via a summary of this passage in Thomas Stanley's seminal *History of Philosophy*: "The Auditors of Pythagoras (such I mean as belonged to the family) were of two Sorts, *Exoterick* and *Esoterick*: the *Exotericks* were those who were under probation, which if they well performed, they were admitted to be *Esotericks*. For, of those who came to *Pythagoras*, he admitted not every one, but only those whom he liked: first, upon choice; and next, by tryal." (372) For a useful compendium of Pythagorean teachings, including the text of Iamblichus, see Algis Uždavinys' *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004).

3 William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*. (London: Wilkie, 1801), 122.

II. *The Esoteric as Implicit Teaching*

He who runs would not care to give careful attention to the development of the idea; and he who stops and thinks would better make the personal effort himself, and thus gain all the good in order to pass it on to someone else by throwing out the suggestion.—T. M. Stewart⁴

A more involved concept of the esoteric is closely interwoven with the first definition, and extends naturally from it. Here, the focus is on hidden meanings which might be available within the tradition. Thus the physical arrangement of exoteric and esoteric classes becomes symbolic of the reality of the situation, which is not about physical proximity at all (i.e., "Are we inside or outside the veil?"), but more about insight and comprehension (i.e., "Do we 'get it' or not?").

The earliest formal paradigm for understanding of the Craft as imbued with esoteric meaning is probably this section from William Preston's first edition of the *Illustrations of Masonry*, published in 1772:

The lapse of time, the ruthless hand of ignorance, and the devastations of war, have laid waste and destroyed many valuable monuments of antiquity. Even the temple of King SOLOMON, so spacious and magnificent, and constructed by so many celebrated artists, was yet laid in ruins, and escaped not the unsparing ravages of barbarous force. Freemasonry, notwithstanding, has been able still to survive. The attentive ear receives the sound from the instructive tongue, and its sacred mysteries are safely lodged in the repository of faithful breasts. The tools and implements of architecture, symbols the most expressive! imprint on the memory wise and serious truths, and transmit unimpaired, through the succession of ages, the excellent tenets of this institution.⁵

This famous paragraph, so familiar to all English speaking Masons (with slight variations), makes it clear that the "wise and serious truths" of Freemasonry have

4 Thomas Milton Stewart, *Symbolic Teaching, or Masonry and its Message*. (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd, 1917), 100.

5 Preston, *Illustrations* (1772 edition), 13–4.

been able to survive despite hostilities rooted in ignorance and barbarism. While the outer structures—the buildings and monuments created by the legendary ancient Masons—were destroyed, the inner teachings survived because they were safely communicable using expressive symbolism attached to innocuous tools and implements, combined with an oral tradition. This method is said to be so effective that the teachings of Freemasonry escaped the ruthless efforts of its opponents, and are said to be transmitted “unimpaired.”⁶

This passage from our tradition impressively echoes one of the key findings of twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss, who extensively studied esoteric modes of expression:

Persecution...gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only.... The fact which makes this literature possible can be expressed in the axiom that thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers.⁷

The fact that Preston’s encapsulation of the Masonic theory of transmission is phrased in legendary terms and cites persecution in the archetypal example of the destruction and profanation of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians does not subtract in any way from the reality that Masonry here “confesses”

6 Cf. Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma* (Charleston, SC: Supreme Council of the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, 1871), where it is even stated not only that the esoteric mode of teaching was adopted “to avoid persecution,” but further that because the symbols have proven so durable, Masonry “smiles at the puny efforts... to crush it out by excommunication and interdiction.” (211) The symbols were chosen “not to *reveal* but to *conceal*,” (106) and therefore “He who desires to understand...must read, study, reflect, digest, and discriminate.” (107) “He who would become an accomplished Mason must not be content merely to hear, or even to understand, the lectures; he must, aided by them, and they having, as it were, marked out the way for him, study, interpret, and develop these symbols for himself.” (22–3)

7 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 25.

that the use of symbolism is to effectively protect the “excellent tenets” from ruthless hands.

But did Preston imagine two classes of “readers” or initiates—some who would “get it” while others would not? This seems clear from the original form of his Entered Apprentice lecture:

Q: Introduced into the Inner Chamber what did you discover?

A: The Master and his brethren all zealously employed in investigating the rise, progress and effect of *hieroglyphic* [i.e., symbolic] *learning*.

Q: What ensued?

A: Three judicious observations were made.

Q: The first observation?

A: That it was a duty incumbent on every Mason to make *daily progress in the art*; as no end could be more noble than the pursuit of virtue and benevolence: no motive more alluring than the practice of honour and justice, or any instruction more beneficial than the *accurate delineation of symbols* which tend to improve and embellish the mind.

Q: The second observation?

A: That *objects, which particularly strike the eye, will more immediately engage the attention and imprint on the memory serious and solemn truths*.

Q: The third observation?

A: That Masons have adopted this mode of conveying instruction by allegory and of preserving their tenets and mysteries secret and inviolate; never permitting them to descend within the reach of *inexperienced novitiates* from whom they might not have been received with due veneration.⁸

Note that the symbolic mode of instruction is described as being adopted specifically to ensure that the inner meanings are concealed not from outsiders, as one might expect, but from inexperienced new initiates... unfit insiders. Preston defines Masonry as “a regular system of morality conceived in a strain of interesting allegory, which readily unfolds its beauties to

8 William Preston as cited in Colin F.W. Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 189. Emphasis added. These words were imported no later than 1797 into American Freemasonry; cf. very similar language in Thomas Smith Webb, *Freemason’s Monitor, or Illustrations of Masonry* (Albany: Spencer & Webb, 1797), 51.

the candid and industrious enquirer.”⁹ That he intends to draw a line between the those who perceive the esoteric messages and those who don’t is made even clearer in his Fellow Craft lecture, when he argues that “According to the progress we make, we *limit or extend* our enquiries; and, in proportion to our talents, we attain to a *less or greater degree of perfection.*”¹⁰

Of course, there is also the ancient tradition of an inherent positive value to hidden truths. As the famous Proverb says, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings to reveal the same.”¹¹ This chapter of Proverbs has often been considered to be concerned with esoteric transmission; this was most famously commented upon by the medieval philosopher Maimonides.¹² And what was true of the written word has also been said of visual symbolism. In reference to the myriad picture books filled with emblematic engravings which were so popular in the later years of the Renaissance period, David Stevenson says:

[Words] could never capture the full meaning of the picture, for it was held ‘that the emblems contain a kind of knowledge which cannot be found in discourse’. The pictures encapsulated underlying Platonic ideas, and if studied properly communicated deep wisdom which could not be expressed in words. But the symbols could never be fully comprehended for they held ‘a plenitude of meanings which meditation and study can never reveal more than partially’ . . . Paradoxically, secrecy and obscurity become an essential part of the great struggle to unlock secrets. Simple and literal language is too shallow, poverty-stricken and vulgar to convey great truths.¹³

9 Preston’s original Apprentice degree lecture, as cited in Dyer, *William Preston*, 207 (emphasis added); cf. similar language in Webb, *Freemason’s Monitor*, 57.

10 Cited in Dyer, *William Preston*, 212. Emphasis added. At various points in his lectures, Preston seems to identify the member who is esoterically aware using terms like “contemplative Mason,” “industrious craftsman,” “accomplished scholar,” “experienced artist,” and “diligent craftsman.”

11 Proverbs 25:2.

12 See especially his *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:6B–7A & 2.65B–66B. Albert Pike, who was familiar with the *Guide*, remained particularly fond of this Proverb, using it (in Latin) to conclude his famous *Morals and Dogma*.

13 David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Cen-*

It is easy to see how esotericism of this second type embodies a richer understanding of Masonic secrecy by recognizing our ability to perceive meaning beyond the literal sense of words, objects and pictures. Deeply tied to the degrees and the symbols themselves, this is Masonic esotericism in its essential and perhaps most important form: the process of interpreting the explicit symbolism and language of the Craft in order to grasp its implicit messages. It is the kind that Antoine Faivre—former chair of esoteric studies at the Sorbonne—typified as an “open secret,” which is available through “a personal effort of progressive elucidation through several successive levels.”¹⁴ Tradition teaches us that the exploration of those levels is part of the duty of every Freemason.

III. *The Esoteric as a Universal Approach*

Adam, our first Parent, created after the Image of God, the great Architect of the Universe, must have had the Liberal Sciences, particularly Geometry, written on his Heart; for even since the Fall, we find the Principles of it in the Hearts of his Offspring. . . —Constitutions of 1723

“Esotericism” is also used in a third sense: as an umbrella term to refer to any number of traditionally secret or highly exclusive spiritual disciplines which have existed either within or alongside more popular philosophical and religious currents. These include certain forms of Christian mysticism (such as Rosicrucianism and Martinism), kabbalism and chariot mysticism in the Jewish tradition, alchemy when viewed as a transformative practice, Pythagoreanism, hermeticism and neo-Platonism.¹⁵ Many of the classic expositors of Masonic philosophy have taken the position that Freemasonry represents either the lineal inheritor of these

tury, 1590–1710 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80–1.

14 Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 5.

15 A summary of useful proposals for a precise definition of Esotericism may be found in Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s article, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’” in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, edited by A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 11–61.

traditions or an attempt to rediscover them.¹⁶ For the sake of clarity I will refer to this third definition as Esotericism (capitalized), as it is less of a condition (first sense) or a style (second sense), but a fairly coherent body of ideas.

Western Esotericism began to coalesce in the Renaissance through the writings of philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Judah Leon Abravanel, who would later be known as the Humanists. These writers perceived a deep interconnection between Jewish, Hellenistic and Christian philosophy, and they considered this common root to be a primordial wisdom which would eventually be termed *philosophia perennis*, “the timeless philosophy.” But the traditions that comprised this Western Esotericism were much older than the Renaissance. Jewish kabbalah had reached its classical stage, in the form of the *Book of the Zohar*, two centuries before Pico introduced the word “kabbalist” into European language.¹⁷ The neo-Platonic elements were even older and dated back to late antiquity.¹⁸

Although a direct lineage to ancient tradition remains unverifiable historically, leading Masonic historian David Stevenson has documented the existence of various hermetic and kabbalistic influences among the early Freemasons, dating back at least to the late 1500s, when William Schaw

reworked the remnants of older masonic organization in Scotland into a lodge system of secret societies, and...injected into these lodges her-

16 Interestingly, both Albert Mackey and Albert Pike took the former view in their earlier work, while later arriving at positions closer to the latter; despite this, they are often dismissed as uncritical. The opposite is actually true, as they were willing to re-examine their deeply held and widely published beliefs.

17 See the citation from the *Zohar* after the conclusion of this article for a vivid example of thirteenth century Jewish esotericism. For Pico’s invention of the Latin words *cabalistae* and *cabalici*, see Iohannes Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabalistica* (1516) 1Q.

18 Even the notion of a “timeless philosophy” underlying all of the world’s religions can be found as early as the first century BCE in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jew living in Egypt. Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), xiv.

metic influences. Other aspects of Renaissance thought...led to the conclusion that the mason craft was far superior to all others, with a central place in the advancement of knowledge—and of course knowledge and spiritual enlightenment were inextricably linked.¹⁹

This interconnection of science and spirit was always a staple of Masonic literature. From the famous Regius Poem of 1390 to the Old Charges of the 1600s, from the legendary history as compiled by James Anderson in 1723 to the ritual lectures that would echo the same themes, speculative Freemasonry has traditionally tied the Mason’s Craft to primordial wisdom. This theme has been ever popular among Masonic writers. James Anderson, Laurence Dermott, William Hutchinson, William Preston, George Oliver, Albert Mackey, Albert Pike, J. S. M. Ward and W. L. Wilmshurst all wove this notion into their philosophical frameworks. Anderson put it quaintly with his image of the liberal sciences being “written on” Adam’s heart and transmitted and improved throughout history until inherited by the London Freemasons.²⁰ Pike updated this concept for the nineteenth century when he argued that:

Masonry is the legitimate successor [of the mysteries]—from the earliest times the custodian and depository of the great philosophical and religious truths, unknown to the world at large, and handed down from age to age by an unbroken current of tradition, embodied in symbols, emblems, and allegories.²¹

Many scholars have been content to reject those who repeat the traditional history as gullible or uncritical, but perhaps they are missing the point. There is more involved here than a list of historical claims to be accepted or rejected; there is a *philosophy of history*, a worldview rooted in perennialist concepts. Attract-

19 Stevenson, *Origins*, 102.

20 See James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: William Hunter, 1723), 1–48.

21 Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, 210. Pike eventually rejected the historicity of an unbroken lineage, although the idea remained part of the legendary teaching of the Scottish Rite degrees he propagated.

tion to those concepts transcends simplistic notions of “Adam the Freemason,” and addresses itself to Western Esotericism’s theories of human dignity and the continuity of wisdom owing to its innate location in original man. Through the legend of Solomon’s Temple, this innate quality became connected to outward endeavor, and the Craft’s historical quest for improvement in architecture was sacralized and invested with philosophical implications.

The popularity of Western Esotericism among some of today’s Masonic candidates cannot be ignored, nor should it. The literal truth of these myths is beside the point. For the most part, those who study Western Esotericism today do not believe the legendary histories word for word. Instead, they tend to be deeply attracted to the uplifting values of perennial philosophy—values our Masonic forebears often understood and promoted. This kind of Esotericism has a special appeal to many serious seekers in our modern world because it offers more than superficial answers, and asks more than a superficial commitment. It has a venerable history as a part of our Masonic culture. Certainly one need not accept it or adhere to it; but perhaps we ought no longer deny its existence, nor characterize it as insignificant.

Esotericism and the Call of Initiation

There stands the majestic tree before you, its ancient roots penetrating deeply into the soil of time, and its leaves and branches covering with their mighty shadow all the pure and good of every clime and country who will come beneath them. Will you ingloriously recline beneath that wide-spread shade, or helplessly lean for support upon its massive and venerable trunk, nor make one effort to pluck the luscious and life-giving fruit which hang in tempting clusters from its boughs?—*Freemasons’ Monthly Magazine*, 1863²²

As overt interest in esoteric approaches to Freemasonry continues to increase, it is reassuring to understand that, far from being a threat to the fraternity, these interests were part—to some degree, all must grant—of

22 “Symbolism and Freemasonry,” *Freemasons’ Monthly Magazine* 22 (1863): 242.

the very foundation of the Craft. This is true in all three senses of the word as we’ve explored it. Masonry utilizes esoteric content because some aspects of the Craft are private. Masonry uses symbolism and language can that only be gradually and variously understood. And at least some influential early Masons were aware of, studied, and adopted certain historical theories from what is today called Western Esotericism.

It is true that—among some circles—an esoteric approach has a certain stigma to overcome.²³ But we should not sell our philosophical heritage short. Our new members aren’t complaining that there is too much philosophy in Masonry, they are more frequently observed saying that they expected *more*.

Is it time to rehabilitate this word, “esoteric”? It may not be such a hard step to take. After all, unless we believe that every person fully and completely understands the degrees the very moment he first experiences them, we are already in the general vicinity of an esoteric approach—because we are effectively saying, “There’s more there, keep looking.” That’s sound advice for the youngest Apprentice, the wisest Past Master, and everyone in between. We are all engaged upon an individual labor which must be wrought upon our own ashlar, a deeply personal process of gradual development through progressive levels of meaning. As William Preston described our work so poetically:

Knowledge must be attained by degrees, and it is not every where to be found. Wisdom seeks the secret shade, the lonely cell designed for contemplation; there enthroned she sits, delivering her sacred oracles: there let us seek her, and pursue the real bliss; for though the passage be difficult, the

23 It is often noted that some who call themselves “esotericists” seem to have few valuable insights. Superficial and biased interpretations are the most common problems. The mistakes that many esotericists make will be the subject of a future article. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that many embrace Esotericism of the third type (as given above) while neglecting esotericism of the second type—or confusing the two types. While the “higher degrees” (especially the Scottish Rite in its European and American Southern Jurisdiction forms) direct us toward the “Western Esoteric tradition” as such, we should recognize that it is the second type of esotericism—the exploration of the Craft’s deep rhetorical and symbolic structure—which is emphasized in early Masonic writings and the Craft Lodge rituals.

further we trace it, the easier it will become.²⁴

New vistas of Masonic understanding are opened when we embrace the fact that esotericism is an historical element of the Craft, wholly in keeping with the classical design of the Order. For many, an esoteric engagement represents a vital Masonic duty. They believe that Freemasonry today has only to gain from a reinvigorated esoteric approach which sees our rich initiatic tradition as what it most assuredly was designed to be: “a subject of contemplation, that enlarges the mind, and expands all its powers; a theme that is inexhaustible, ever new, and always interesting.”²⁵

* * *

Once there was a man who lived up in the mountains and who was a stranger to civilization—he planted wheat and ate the grains uncooked. Then he happened to come down to the city. A good loaf of bread was served to him. “What’s this?” he asked. “Bread, for eating!” they said. He ate it and was pleased. He asked, “What is this made of?” and they told him it was wheat. Then, he was served a fine cake kneaded in oil. He had a taste and asked, “And now this, what’s this made of?” Once more they said, “Wheat.” Finally, they brought him a delectable pastry in oil and honey, fit for a king. He asked again, and got the same answer. “Well,” he then boasted, “I am *above* these things; I eat only the wheat which is the basis of all of them.” Because of his ignorant attitude, he would evermore remain a stranger to these delights, which were lost on him. That is how it is with anyone who learns basic principles and then stops short—who fails to become aware of the delights which derive from the deeper consideration and application of those principles.—*Zohar* 2:176 A–B

24 Preston, *Illustrations* (1772 edition), 86–7. Preston derived this from a nearly identical passage from an oration delivered by Charles Leslie to the Vernon Kilwinning Lodge in Edinburgh, May 15, 1741, the text of which was published in *The Edinburgh Free-Masons Pocket Companion* (1765), 162. This passage has been absorbed into many official versions of the Masonic ritual.

25 Preston’s original Apprentice degree Charge, cited in Dyer, *William Preston*, 188.

About the Author

Shawn Eyer is a Past Master of Academia Lodge N° 847, F&AM of California. He teaches in the liberal arts program at John F. Kennedy University, and edits *Ahiman: A Review of Masonic Arts & Letters*.

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