The Three Lesser Lights

Masonry deliberately perpetuated the customs of our ancient brethren. The three great lights of nature, which in the Ancient Mysteries were represented by images dedicated respectively to the Sun, the Moon and Mercury, have become the three lesser lights of a Masonic lodge, but how, when or where the substitution of the "Master of the Lodge" for "Mercury" crept in, it is impossible to trace. There seems to be about as much justification for it as there was for the addition by Jeremy Cross of the "Marble Monument" and its explanation as given in the lecture of the third degree. While the three lesser lights are to be found in all regular Masonic lodges there seems to be no fixed rule as to where they should be placed in the lodge.

In some jurisdictions a light is placed at the station of the Master, one at that of the Senior Warden and one at that of the Junior Warden. There may be some justification for this arrangement but it would not be possible to adapt it to the "work" as it is now given in this and many other jurisdictions.

In some lodges they are represented by a metal stand about three feet high with three arms branching out at the top. At the extremity of each arm is a light and these lights are in the form of an equilateral triangle. This metal stand is usually placed at the right of the altar as one faces the East. In other lodges the three lesser lights are grouped about the altar in the form of a right angle triangle; the base of the triangle parallel to the West, with the hypothenuse running from the South to the East to join up with the perpendicular in the East. The metal stand with its branching arms in the form of an equilateral triangle is emphatically incorrect. It is a product of an inventive age and a concession to cheapness and facility in installation which should never be tolerated save when a more expensive arrangement is inadvisable.

The other grouping is the one used in this and many other jurisdictions. It is sanctioned by Albert Pike than whom there is no greater authority. He uses this arrangement in his liturgy for the first as well as in the thirty-second degree. This arrangement is justified too in that it is the natural position in which to place the triangle, could we but consider it as separate and apart from the necessity of avoiding the placing of a light in the North; in that the base, which here represents "Ignorance" is surpassed in potentiality by "Learning," represented by the perpendicular which is longer than the base as four is to three. This perpendicular runs from East to West which constantly reminds us of the belief of our ancient brethren that all learning has its origin in and proceeds from the East.

This grouping, however, might be considered objectionable in that it places a light in the North directly opposite the one in the South. This is contrary both to the practices of the Ancient Mysteries as well as to teachings of modern Masonry. In the Ancient Mysteries the initiate in his circumambulations followed the course which our forefathers ascribed to the-sun in his daily travels. When the initiate reaches the East, it is here the Sun rises, at the South the Sun is at meridian height, while it is in the West that the Sun sets. From here until he reaches the East again the initiate is supposed to be traveling at night, or as we say in a place of darkness. For this reason modern Masonry has no light in the North and not for the reason as given in our lecture in the first degree.

The correct placing as depicted in all the ancient prints we have been able to find, fixes the lights about the altar in the form of a right-angled triangle but with the right angle at the South; the base runs from the East to the South, the hypothenuse runs from the East to the West with the perpendicular connecting the South with the West. Both methods represent the right angled triangle as we have it in the 47th Problem of Euclid. Its sides in the proportion of 3, 4 and 5 of which proportion 3 is the base, 4 the perpendicular, and 5 the hypothenuse. Its perpendicular represents the male, its base, the female, while the hypothenuse represents their progeny or the product of the two. Thus to the ancients did this right-angled triangle represent "Humanity."

The light in the East is dedicated to the Master of the lodge, the one in the West to the sun and the one in the South to the moon. As the Master sits in the East the light dedicated to the Sun is on his right hand; the one to the Moon is on his left. Hence you will understand why the jewels of the Senior and Junior Deacons who likewise sit on his right and left bear respectively representations of the Sun and of the Moon.

Therefore, in pointing out the lesser lights to the initiate, the Master should be careful to call his attention first to the light in the West as representing the Sun, next to the one in the South as representing the Moon and finally to the one in the East as representing the Master of the Lodge. When the three principal officers of the lodge group themselves about the altar each should be careful to take his stand directly in front of his respective station. They will thus form an equilateral triangle ever considered by our ancient brethren as an emblem of "Deity."

With the Master, Senior and Junior Wardens thus grouped about the altar we have formed a living equilateral triangle symbol of Deity; with the three lesser lights about the altar forming the right-angled triangle of Euclid, symbol of Humanity. We, therefore, have at the conferring of each and every degree in Masonry a striking symbolism of the two great fundamental teachings of our order:--"The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man."

**- Source: The Builder September 1918**

**LESSER LIGHTS**

**SHORT TALK BULLETIN  
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When an initiate is first brought into the light in a Masonic Lodge, the radiance come from the Lesser Lights, which form a triangle about the Altar. It seems, at first, rather odd that so great and important a symbol should receive such scant attention in the ritualistic body of Freemasonry. We are instructed that they are called Lesser Lights, that they are placed in a triangle, that by their light we may see other objects, that they represent the Sun, Moon and Worshipful Master, for certain reasons which are rather briefly explained . . . and that is all! Later on we learn, more by example than by precept, more by custom than by law, that Lesser Lights are always lit when a lodge is opened. Even when their flames do not really burn (have you ever stood at a grave side on a day too windy to permit the flickering candle to send forth its light?) they are constructively burning. They are supposed to be lighted as soon as the lodge is opened, and then the Altar is arranged; to be extinguished after the Altar is disarranged, and the Great Lights displaced. But nowhere in our ritual are we told much of anything as to why all these things are so; how the Lesser Lights came to be; what their hidden, covered, secret, symbolic meaning is.

And you shall search through many a Masonic volume and tome and find no more light on the Lesser Lights than the ritual gives. Mackey, the great authority, is unusually brief, and beyond drawing a parallel to the use of the seven branched candelabra as described in the Great Light, and stating that their use in Masonry is very old, they appearing in print in references to Masonry in the seventeenth century, adds practically nothing to the ritual explanations. And yet it could not be possible that so important a symbol could have no more soul than is given in the few words we devote to it. It seems obvious that it is one of those symbols in Freemasonry . . . of which there are so many! . . . which the individual brother is supposed to examine and translate for himself, getting from it what he can, and enjoying what he gets in direct proportion to the amount of labor and thought he is willing to devote to the process of extracting the meaning from the outer covering.

Immediately after the Lesser Lights are named, our attention is directed to the fact that they are in a triangle about the Altar. In some Jurisdictions they are closely about the Altar; in others, one is placed at each of the stations of the three principal officers. In some lodges the three Lesser Lights form a right, in others an equilateral; in others an isosceles triangle. What is uniform through out the Masonic World is the triangular formation about the Altar; what is different is the shape and size of the triangle. Of course, it is not possible to place three lights to form anything else but a triangle, or a straight line; they cannot be made to form a square or a star. Which brings us to the first place in which to sink our Masonic shovel; why are there three Lesser Lights, and not two or four?

There are a number of reasons. Any thinking brother has already discovered that there is "Three" throughout the whole system of Ancient Craft Masonry; three degrees, three steps, three ancient Grand Masters; and so on. It will be no surprise to recall that three is the first of the great Sacred Numbers of the ancient Mysteries, and that it is the numerical symbol of God. Not, if you please, because God was necessarily considered triune.. While many religions of many ages and peoples have conceived of Divinity as a trinity, the figure three as a symbol of God is far older than any trinitarian doctrine. It comes from the triangle, which is the first possible figure made up of straight lines which is without either beginning or ending. One line, or two lines have ends. They start and finish. The triangle, like the square or the five or more sided figure, has no loose ends. and the triangle is the first of these which can be made; as God was always considered as first; and also as without either beginning or ending, the triangle itself soon became a symbol of Deity.

Sun worship was among the first of religions; let him who knows lay down the facts as to whether sun worship preceded fire worship, or fire worship that of the sun. To us it does not matter. Sun worship is far, far older than any recorded history; it goes back, far back, into the first dim mists which obscure the very first beginnings of intelligence. So it was only natural that the early worshipers should set a light beside their Altar or Holy place and name it for the sun.

Ancient peoples made much of sex. Their two greatest impulses were self-preservation and mating. Their third was protection of children. So enormously powerful were these impulses in primal man, that not all his civilization, his luxury, his complicated and involved life, have succeeded in removing these as the principal mainsprings of all human endeavor. It was natural for the savage worshiper of a shining God in the sky to think he, too, required a mate; especially when that mate was so plainly in evidence; the moon became the Sun's bride by a process of reasoning as plain as it was childlike. Father, Mother . . . there must be a child, of course. And that child was mercury, the nearest planet to the sun, the one the God kept closest to him. Here we have the origin of the three Lesser Lights; in earliest recorded accounts of the Mysteries of Eleusis ( to mention only one) we find three lights about the Holy Place, representing the Sun, Moon and Mercury.

**Albert Pike says:**

*"They are still the three lights of a Masonic Lodge, except that for Mercury, the Master of the Lodge has been absurdly substituted."*

Albert Pike was a very great and a very learned man.

To him Freemasonry owes a debt greater, perhaps, than to any other who ever lived; he gave her study, he brought forth her poetry, he interpreted her symbols, he defined her truths, he made plain much that she had concealed. But Pike himself defended the right of Masons to study and interpret the symbols of Freemasonry for themselves. So that it is with no though of controversy with the immortal dead that many contend that there is no absurdity in Freemasonry taking the ancient lights which symbolized the Sun, Moon and Mercury, and making them stand for the Sun, Moon and Worshipful Master of His Lodge.

For the Sun and Moon give light. While it is true that there is no real "regularity" with which the Moon "Governs" the night . . . since the night gets a along just as well without the Moon as with her . . . she does give light when she is present. There is no question that the Sun Governs and Rules the day. And the Sun, of course lives light and life as well.

The Worshipful Master rules and governs his lodge as truly as the sun and Moon rule the day and night. There can be no lodge without a Worshipful Master; he is, in a very real sense, the lodge itself. There are some things he cannot do that the brethren, under him, can do. But, without him the brethren can do nothing, while he, without the brethren's consent or even their assistance, can do much. It is one of the principal functions of the Worshipful Master to disseminate light - Masonic Light - to his lodge. That the duty is as often honored by neglect as by performance has nothing to do with the fact that it is a duty. So that the inclusion of a symbol of the Worshipful Master, as a giver of light, is to most of us neither fanciful nor absurd, but a logical carrying out of that Masonic doctrine which makes a Master a Giver of Light to his brethren.

The ritual instructs candidates that they behold the Great Lights of Masonry by the illumination of the Lesser Lights. This is an actual fact, but it is also a symbol. The Great Light cannot be read without light; the Square and Compasses cannot be used in the dark; and neither can be understood, nor can we make any use of them for the noble and glorious purposes taught us in Speculative Masonry, without we receive symbolic light, Masonic light from the East; that is, from the Worshipful Master, or those he delegates to bring that "Good and Wholesome Instruction" which is at once his duty and his happiness.

That we know better is in no sense antagonistic to our use of the old, old phrase in our ceremonies. We know better about many things. The knowledge of the art of architecture as set forth in the Middle Chamber lecture would get no one a job as office boy in a builder's office today. Our penalties, never enforced by Masons, are wholly symbolic. We have many other ways of transmitting intelligence today which are not included in a list of ways of writing and printing. But we love and repeat the old ritual because it is old; because it is a bond with those who have gone this way before us, because it is the time-tried and well-trusted way of making Masons, and we would not alter it; no, not for any modern phrases, no matter how deep in erudition they were steeped.

And so we continue to have our moon "govern" the night, and do it "regularly," too, finding in this a bond with other men of other times something dear and precious, none the less that the words portray only a fancy.

Indeed, the whole matter of the Lesser Lights is such a bond, and such a fancy. It would be far more accurate if we repeated "The Lesser Lights represent the Sun,, the Earth and the Moon. As the sun, in its gravity, causes the earth to revolve around it in three- hundred and sixty-five and a fraction days, and the moon revolves about the earth in approximately twenty-eight days, so the earth is never without government and light, as all lodges should also be."

**- Source: Short Talk Bulletin - Feb. 1926**[**Masonic Service Association of North America**](http://www.msana.com/)