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THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

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The Eleusinian Mysteries flourished in Greece more than eighteen hundred years before the Christian era. It continued until the beginning of the fifth century when Theodosius the Great issued an edict abolishing all pagan theology including the Mysteries of Eleusis ----- they went underground and records indicate they existed in Athens until the eighth century A.D. From Greece the Mysteries spread to Rome where in 117 A.D., during the reign of the Emperor Adrian, the same Rites and ceremonies were celebrated with splendor; they even reached the capital of France, and in the year 936 A.D., we are told by a Bro. John Yarker that parts of the Mysteries were enacted in the Lodges of York, England.

Some Masonic scholars believe that many of our Masonic emblems and symbols descend directly from the Eleusinian Mysteries. The Greeks adorned the floors of their Temples with Mosaic pavements, and the Grand Honors of Freemasonry have their counterpart in the rhythmic applause of the ancient Greeks.

At the Temple of Eleusis the three columns of architecture, the Ionic, the Doric and the Corinthian, were revered as they are in Masonry.

Historians give much credit to the Mysteries for the development and formation of the high degree of civilization which was enjoyed by Greece for so many centuries.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were dedicated to Demeter, the goddess of Agriculture, who was worshipped by the Greeks as the symbol of the prolific earth, and in them were dramatically represented the search for and recovery of her lost daughter Peresphone. The doctrines of the unity of God and the immortality of the soul were esoterically taught. Great truths were inculcated and elucidated through the medium of drama. The ultimate aim was the elevation of the neophyte through his symbolic death and rebirth.

Cicero informs us that men came from the remotest regions and the most distant nations to be initiated into the sacred and august Eleusinia, and he adds: "Though Athens brought forth many divine things, yet she never created anything more noble than those sublime Mysteries through which we have become gentler and have advanced from a barbarous and rustic life to a civilized one, so that we not only live more joyfully but die also with a better hope."

The Institution was founded by Orpheus, a man of no ordinary character. He was a poet of most exalted genius, a man of ardent imagination and profound feeling. After the death of his beautiful wife Eurydice the slumbering energies of his soul awakened, and lead to that sublime regeneration in which the love of his Eurydice was expanded to the love of his people and his

nation. He now addressed himself with earnestness and zeal to the great work of reforming society, taming the rude and semi-barbarous men of his nation, and laying the foundations of the glorious fabric of Grecian civilization, which became, in after ages, the wonder and admiration of the world.

After his travels into many distant lands in search of wisdom he returned to his own country to plant the seeds of a new and higher civilization. These seeds were the foundation stones of a new order which in later years came to be known as the Eleusinian Mysteries. The rites were first celebrated in the forests and on the highest hills, afterward however, a temple of vast extent and magnificent appearance was erected and consecrated as the depository of the sacred Mysteries at Eleusis, a humble village just on the outskirts of the city of Athens.

The Temple consisted of three main parts. The postulant stood within a vestibule or anteroom, from which he passed between two columns into the Peribolos or inner chamber, an oblong chapel corresponding to the holy place of the Temple of Solomon. From there he entered the *Mystekos Sekos* or *Sanctum Sanctorum* which was dedicated to Demeter and Persephone. Pausanias informs us that there was a lantern in the ceiling, throwing its blazing light upon the Altar and on the praying neophyte. The images of the sun, the moon and Hermes were represented there as the Three Lights of the Eleusinian Lodge. Hermes was the spiritual Master of the lodges of the ancient Greek Mysteries. Under the Temple was a subterranean apartment, representing the infernal regions, through which the candidate traveled.

The qualifications for initiation were that the candidate was of lawful age, that he had endeavored to live a pure life, was of good moral character, free born and a believer in Providence. It was also necessary that he be well-recommended by someone already initiated in the same Mysteries. Members were appointed to investigate, examine and prepare the candidate for initiation.

In conducting the Mysteries, there were four officers of the *Epoptae*, namely: (1) The Hierophant, or explainer of the sacred things. He sat in the East, on a throne decorated with gold, presided over the ceremonies and explained the nature of the sacred Mysteries to the neophyte. The Hierophant, according to Porphyry was called *Melissae*, meaning bee. The *Epoptae* considered the bees to be symbolic of the new-born souls. The Beehive was one of the emblems of the order. (2) The *Dadouchus*, or torch-bearer represented the sun and appears to have acted as the immediate assistant to the Hierophant. He was the leader of the procession of the candidates, and took care of the Great Lights. (3) The *Hierocerys*, or sacred herald, had the general care of the temple, guarding it from the profanation of the uninitiated, and took charge of the aspirant during the trials of initiation. (4) The *Epibomus*, or altar-server, conducted the sacrifices. He was symbolic of the moon. No one was allowed to be elected or appointed to these honorable positions except those who had been raised to the third or highest degree of the *Epoptae*.

The Mysteries were divided into two classes, the lesser and the greater. The aspirant was initiated into the first section of the lesser degree which was known as the degree of Purification in the month of February and into the second section or degree of *Mystae*, that is to say, the Hoodwinked, in the month of September. After the expiration of one year, he was elevated to the

sublime degree of the Epopetae, known as the Overseer. No one could be admitted to the degree of Overseer without passing through this period of preparation on pain of death. The lesser Mysteries were, thus preparatory to the greater. The lesser were a public ceremony of sort and were performed on the plains just outside the Temple walls and on the banks of the river Ilissus, whose waters supplied one of the means of moral purification of aspirants, the other two elements of purification being fire and air.

The ceremonies of the Eleusinian Rites began with a proclamation by the Sacred Herald ordering the profane to depart “begone, ye vulgar, begone.”

The candidate for initiation into the lesser Mysteries was prepared in a very familiar manner: His right arm and breast were bare, he was hoodwinked, and he was also invested with a cord of three threads around his waist. His feet, one foot shod and the other bare, according to Virgil, were placed on the skin of an animal, usually a ram, that had been sacrificed to Jupiter. In this position he was asked if he had eaten bread and if he was pure; his replies being satisfactory, an oath of secrecy was administered; he then passed through other symbolic ceremonies, the mystical signification of which was explained to him by the Hierophant. He was then called a Myster, a title derived from the Greek word meaning to shut the eyes, thus signifying that he was still blind as to the greater truths which were to be revealed later. The neophyte's reception into the more sublime rites of the greater Mysteries lasted nine days and were celebrated partly on the Thriasian plain which surrounded the temple and partly in the temple of Eleusis itself.

The public promenade on the plain and on the sacred way from Athens to Eleusis were made in honor of Demeter and Persephone. Mystical allusions were made to events in the life of both. The processions were made in the daytime, but the initiation was nocturnal. The aspirant was clothed in a sacred tunic and again hoodwinked. He waited in the vestibule for the opening of the doors of the sanctuary. He was then conducted on a long and painful pilgrimage through many dark and circuitous passages. The subsequent events are to a large degree conjecture, for any attempt to disclose the esoteric ceremonies of initiation was punished with death. It is not, therefore, surprising that in the accounts of them, we should find such uncertain and even conflicting assertions of the ancient writers, who hesitated to discuss publicly so forbidden a subject,

An episode of the drama represented the travels of Demeter, in search of her lost daughter, her descent into hell, and her subsequent return into the upper world and the light of day. Having now followed in the footsteps of Demeter possibly representing the Death of Winter and the rebirth of Spring the initiate was thenceforth called an Epopeta, a word signifying he who beholds.

The mysteries of Eleusinia, not only were not disclosed to the profane, but were veiled in allegory, and revealed gradually to those prepared for initiation, by means of symbols, while full esoteric light was given only to the recipient of the high grade of the Epopetae who honoured in strict secrecy what they saw.

The ceremonies of the Third Degree were impressive, each candidate was individually conducted to the altar where he touched and kissed the sacred symbols. Among the Symbols and Emblems

of the Mysteries were the Beehive, the ear of corn and the fruit of the pomegranate. Pluto, the god of the underworld, gave Persephone four pomegranate pips as a plentiful supply of food for her journey to the surface of the earth. Corn was sacred to Demeter; in 'Copenhagen' is a statue of her holding corn and poppies in her left hand.

The aspirant to the Sublime Degree of the Epophtae took the oath of Obligation on the holy book. We are informed by Pausanias, that this book was called Petroma and was made of two stones, bearing sacred inscriptions. The penalty of the obligation was death. Secret signs and words of recognition were imparted to the candidate.

During the performance of initiation a funeral procession took place with music and dirges of lamentation. It was conducted according to the Greek custom of the Rite of Circumambulation; three times around the altar traveling from east to west. The candidate was stretched upon a Pastos or couch, symbolic of death. Over the body the Hierophant delivered an oration. He was then resurrected as a symbol of the restoration of the soul to eternal life, and of the new life he was about to embrace.

It is hard to deny the coincidence that exists between this Eleusinian drama and that enacted in the third degree of Masonry, It is not claimed that one was the uninterrupted successor of the other but there must have been a common ideal or source for the origin of both. The lesson, the dogma, the symbol, and the method of instruction are the same.

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