

Blue, The Colour of Freemasonry

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And God said,
"Let there be light!"
And there was light.

According to both biblical mythology and scientific hypothesis, Creation began with a dazzling sunburst of blazing light- The Big Bang! And so begins every Brother's new life in Masonry. From the moment when the Initiate is "Restored to the blessing of material light" the steady, unvarying pursuit, the life-long quest of every Free and Accepted Mason is further Light. The Freemason, exploring the hidden mysteries of nature and science heeds the call enunciated by the poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850):

*Come forth into the light of things,
Let nature be your Teacher*

The Craft Lodge and the myriad of degrees and orders conferred in all its appendant and concordant bodies were created and continue to exist to fulfil this obsession for Masonic enlightenment.

Light naturally produces colour. Indeed in a simple experiment we all performed as schoolboys, it can be demonstrated that white light is composed of a whole spectrum of colours. As if by magic, passing sunlight through a prism produces a rainbow of seven colours: violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. Sir Isaac Newton, the English mathematician and physicist discovered this phenomenon, known as refraction, in 1666.

The ingenuity of man soon found ways and devised means of imitating nature. In prehistoric times cave paintings were brightly coloured and animal skins were dyed. Furthermore, from the earliest times, the use of colour soon assumed symbolic meaning. Of particular interest to us as Masons there is historic evidence that proves our ancient operative brethren employ colour symbolism. When the temple at Ur in Sumer, built in the second millenium BCE, was unearthed in 1923 by the British Archeologist, Sir Charles Leonard Wooley, the stage pyramid, or ziggurat was coloured: the lowest levels black the upper red, the topmost shrine was faced with blue-glazed tiles, and the structure was crowned with a canopy of gold. To those ancient Sumerians who inhabited lower Mesopotamia, "*the land between the two rivers*" (now southern Iraq) and the sire of the earliest human civilization, these colours represented the dark Netherworld, the habitable Earth, the sky, and the sun.

The history of the Israelites recorded in the Old Testament is replete with many references to the specific use of colour to symbolize royal rank and priestly function. In the *Book of Exodus* we read that the ten curtains of the Tabernacle of Moses were to be made "of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet- the royal colours. The vestments worn by Aaron, the high priest, were richly embroidered: "And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, and of purple, of scarlet, and fine twined linen with cunning work." [*Exodus 28:6*] Significantly, the *ephod* of the Hebrew priests was an apron type garment of linen. (We might note in passing that the motto in Hebrew "*Kodesh la-Adonai*" - *Holiness to the Lord* - which was engraved on the plate affixed to the High Priest's mitre, was adopted as the motto of the United Grand Lodge of England, and appears in the Arms of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario.)

Hiram, Solomon's friend and political ally, ruled the city-kingdom of Tyre, the most important city of ancient Phoenicia on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. At this period, around 1100 BCE, the Phoenicians were the most notable traders and sailors of the ancient world. One of their principal industries was the manufacture of textiles and dyes. In particular, they produced a rich purple dye with a hue between violet and red, called Tyrian purple, derived from the Murex shellfish found in the Mediterranean Sea. (The

word Phoenician is derived from the Greek word porphura = purple.) The biblical land Canaan was "the land of purple."

Hiram, (or *Huram* as the name is given in *II Chronicles*), the master craftsman imported from Tyre to act as chief architect of the first Temple at Jerusalem, is described as "a cunning man, endowed with understanding ... skilful to work in gold, and in silver, in brass, in iron, in stone, and in timber, in purple, in blue, and in fine linen, and in crimson." [*II Chronicles 2:13-14*]

In the Book of *Esther* we read the story of Mordecai the Jewish hero who saved his people exiled in Persia from massacre and annihilation. Through the influential interception of Queen Esther, King Ahasuerus spared Mordecai's life and rewarded him with his appointment as grand vizier. The moral lesson of the story, which biblical scholars suggest is historical fiction, is included as an important part in the ritual ceremonies of the *Order of the Eastern Star*. In robes befitting his new rank and station: "Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a fine garment of fine linen and purple." [*Esther 8:15*]

The Royal Purple: The darker hue of "garter blue", being a blend of red and blue, is more precisely described as "purple." Purple cloth was worn as a symbol of royalty or high office. To be "clothed in purple - the purple of kings" denotes dignity and supreme, or royal, authority. In the early days of the Roman Empire, the Imperial family and the nobility wore purple, and as late as the 4th Century CE, cloth coloured with Tyrian purple was recognized as the symbol of royalty.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence for the influence of Hebrew religious tradition on Masonic colours as they are used on regalia, is found in this descriptive passage: "(The Lord spake unto Moses, saying) Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make fringes on the borders of their garments ... and that they put on the fringe ... a ribband of blue." [*Numbers 15:38-40*] The blue border seems to prefigure the border of sky blue ribbon which adorns the Master Mason apron. The moral exhortation given in this passage in the Old Testament seems to resonate through the Apron Charge: "Speak to the sons of Israel and tell them to put tassels on the hems of their garments and to put a violet cord on this tassel at the hem. You must have a tassel, then, and the sight of it will remind you of all the commands of *Yahweh*. You are to put them into practice then, and no longer follow the desires of your own heart and your eyes, which have led you to make wantons of yourselves. [*Numbers 15:38-40* Jerusalem Bible] In the words of the ritual, "it is meant to remind you of those important duties which you have just solemnly engaged yourself to perform."

In the Old Testament scriptures the Hebrew word "*tekelet*", a word which denotes "*perfection*", and which the Authorized Version (1611) translates as "blue", is probably more accurately interpreted as "*purple-blue*" or "*violet*". Remember, however, that the only English translation of the Bible readily available to ritualists and symbolists in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was the Authorized, or King James, Version.

Blue, darkly, deeply, beautifully blue..

Robert Southey (1774- 1853)

Before we embark on a consideration of the prevalence of the colour blue in Freemasonry, it might be helpful and informative to examine the symbolism of colour in general and blue in particular as it has been employed by people throughout the ages in many cultures.

In his thorough study of the subject, *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meanings* (1994), Dr. David Fontana, Professor of Psychology at the University of Wales, establishes several basic premises: 1) All visual symbols have both shape and colour. 2) The symbolic language of colours is related to the hues of the natural world, e.g. blue sky, red blood, gold sun. 3) Colours have an impact on our emotions, a psychological effect with the ability "to arouse or to tranquilize, to gladden or

depress." In terms of everyday experiences we all "see red" when angry, "turn green" with envy, and "feel blue" when unhappy. Life itself is "colourful" and, by contrast, either black or white, the absence of colour, symbolizes Death.

While our Grand Jurisdiction deprecates the term, we have often heard, particularly by our brethren in the United States, the Craft Lodges colloquially described as "*Blue Lodges*", and the first three degrees referred to as "*Blue Degrees*" or collectively as "*Blue Freemasonry*". Similarly, Chapters in Capitular Masonry as known as "*Red Lodges*", from the predominant colour of the regalia worn by Royal Arch Masons.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament sheweth his handiwork*

Psalm 19

As with most symbols adopted and adapted to illustrate the moral teachings of Freemasonry, blue, the colour of the sky, has been recognized at all times and considered by diverse cultures a beneficent colour, a symbol for things of the spirit and the intellect, denoting piety, eternity (applied to Deity), immortality (applied to man), chastity, sincerity, and fidelity. It is a symbol of the truth, and what is true is eternal. Thus, blue symbolizes the eternity of God and man's hope is immortality. [Biedermann, Hans. *Dictionary of Symbolism*, 1994]

The English essayist and poet John Addison (1672-1719) sang:

*The spacious firmament on high,
with all the blue ethereal sky,
and spangled heavens, a shining frame,
their great Original proclaim.*

The Junior Warden tells the Entered Apprentice that "The covering of a Masonic lodge is a celestial canopy of divers colours, even the heavens." In the northern hemisphere the clear sky generally appears as light blue, which in heraldic terms we call azure, in painting cerulean (*bleu celeste*, heavenly blue, from the Latin *caelum*, heaven), or *sky blue* (the colour stipulated for regalia in the *Book of Constitution*).

... her hue she derives from the blue vault of heaven ...

Blue, the colour of the sky is a symbol of the universality of Freemasonry. Albert Mackey (1807-1881) gives us this interpretation and implies a moral application: "It; is to the Freemason a symbol of universal friendship and benevolence, as it is the colour of the vault of heaven, which embraces and covers the whole globe, we are thus reminded that in the breast of every brother these virtues should be equally as extensive."

The following lines are included in the Masonic catechism of William Preston (1742-1818), the great English ritualist, on which so much of our modern Masonic ritual is based.

How do we see the Master?

With homage and respect we would hail him master of the art.

How should he be clothed?

That the world should mark his consequence, we should clothe him in royal robes, blue, purple and scarlet.

Why?

Because those colours adorn the thrones of eastern monarchs, celebrated for their pageantry, and of such colours was the veil of the Temple of Jerusalem composed, which attracted the attention of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Why would you thus distinguish him?

That by this testimony of our regard we might exemplify to the world our opinion of his merit, and afford him an opportunity to display his superior skill and talent, before the world, that he might receive the honours to which he was justly entitled.

At the Union of the two English Grand Lodges, the Book of Constitution, 1815, specified that the rosettes, lining and edging of aprons should be "sky blue", collars "light blue" and "garter blue" for Grand Lodge and Provincial Grand Lodge Officers. The English Masonic scholar Bernard Jones suggests that, "The English Grand Lodge, in choosing the colours of its clothing, was guided mainly by the colours associated with the Noble Orders of the Garter and the Bath." Can it be mere coincidence that the colours of the two old English universities are respectively deep blue- *Oxford blue*, and light blue- *Cambridge blue*? At the formation of the Grand Lodge of Canada in 1855, the clothing of the United Grand Lodge of England was adopted: sky blue for Lodge members, and garter blue with gold trimming for Grand Lodge Officers.

In the science of heraldry, *azure* is the term used to denote the colour blue, an emblem of fidelity and truth. The colour is represented in heraldic devices by horizontal lines. The operative mason must of necessity continuously "*try levels and prove horizontals*" by applying his "*level*" the basic testing tool of his ancient Craft. Once again, I ask you, can this be merely a happy coincidence?

In his helpful study of Symbolism *The Perfect Ashlar* (1963), the Reverend Brother John T. Lawrence, admitting that "The attempt to derive ethical teaching from the clothing of a Freemason must always yield more or less fanciful results" relates a lecture with tongue-in-cheek that purported the *azure* or *light blue* "which distinguished brethren still in the fighting line was the colour of the sky when the sun was still pursuing his daily course, the period of industry and labour. But the purple or the dark blue was the colour of the sky when the sun had retired and the period of rest had set in." Elsewhere in the same study, discussing Masonic Titles and Dignities, Lawrence suggests, more seriously, that the regalia of Grand Office is of a darker shade of blue, "inasmuch as these particular brethren had to work harder than their fellows, whose field of labour was confined to the private lodge, it was desirable that they should wear something of a colour that would less readily show the stains of toil."

An old adage runs, "*True blue will never stain*" - an expression which is often quoted to imply that "*a really noble heart will never disgrace itself*" This moral takes its origin from the common practice of butchers, who wear dark blue aprons and blouses because they do not show bloodstains, inevitable in the practice of their trade. All Freemasons will readily recall the assurance given at the conclusion of the Apron Charge when the Candidate is invested in the First Degree- "*if you never disgrace that badge it will never disgrace you.*"

At the end of the day we are left with yet another of those unanswered (perhaps unanswerable?) questions which intrigue and fascinate the serious Masonic student: "*Did ancient symbolism inspire the colours of Freemasonry, or were they first chosen and the symbolism then found to fit them?*" Bro. Bernard Jones concludes, "Whichever came first - symbolism or colours it IS undeniable that Freemasonry attaches considerable importance to colours."

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