

The Acacia

The Acacia is a highly symbolic plant with both quasi-religious aspects and more modern day connections to occult and psychoactive aspects used in ritual practice.

Mackey, in his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, says:

An interesting and important symbol in Freemasonry. Botanically, it is the *acacia vera* of Tournefort, and the *mimosa nilotica* of Linnaeus, called babul tree in India. The *acacia arabica* grew abundantly in the vicinity of Jerusalem, where it is still to be found, and is familiar in its modern use at the tree from which the gum arabic of commerce is derived.

The acacia is called in the Bible *Shittim*, which is really the plural of Shittah, which last form occurs once only, in *Isaiah 41:19*, which reads “*I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together...*” . It was esteemed a sacred wood among the Hebrews, and of it Moses was ordered to make the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the table for the shewbread, and the rest of the sacred furniture (*Exodus 25-27*).

The sprig of acacia, then, in its most ordinary signification, presents itself to the Master Mason as a symbol of the immortality of the soul, being intended to remind him, by its ever-green and unchanging nature, of that better and spiritual part within us, which, as an emanation from the Great Architect of the Universe, can never die.

SYMBOLISM

First, the acacia, in the mythic system of Freemasonry, is pre-eminently the symbol of the IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL – that important doctrine which it is the great design of the Institution to teach. As the evanescent nature of the flower, which “cometh forth and is cut down,” reminds us of the transitory nature of human life, so the perpetual renovation of the evergreen plant, which uninterruptedly presents the appearance of youth and vigour: is aptly compared to that spiritual life in which the soul, freed from the corruptible companionship of the body, shall enjoy an eternal spring and an immortal youth. Hence, in the impressive funeral service of our Order, it is said that “this evergreen is an emblem of our faith in the immortality of the soul. By this we are reminded that we have an immortal part within us, which shall survive the grave, and which shall never, never, never die.” And again, in the closing sentences of the monitorial lecture of the Third Degree, the same sentiment is repeated, and we are told that by “the ever-green and ever-living sprig ” the Mason is strengthened” with confidence and composure to look forward to a blessed immortality.” Such an interpretation of the symbol is an easy and a natural one; it suggests itself at once to the least reflective mind; and consequently, in some one form or another, is to be found existing in all ages and nations. It was an ancient custom-which is not, even now, altogether disused-for mourners to carry in their hands at funerals a sprig of some

evergreen, generally the cedar or the cypress, and to deposit it in the grave of the deceased. According to Dalcho,* the Hebrews always planted a sprig of the acacia at the head of the grave of a departed friend. [John] Potter tells us that the ancient Greeks “had a custom of bedecking tombs with herbs and flowers.”† All sorts of purple and white flowers were acceptable to the dead, but principally the amaranth and the myrtle. The very name of the former of these plants, which signifies “never fading,” would seem to indicate the true symbolic meaning of the usage, although archaeologists have generally supposed it to be simply an exhibition of love on the part of the survivors. Ragon says that the ancients substituted the acacia for all other plants because they believed it to be incorruptible, and not liable to injury from the attacks of any kind of insect or other animal—thus symbolizing the incorruptible nature of the soul.

Hence we see the propriety of placing the sprig of acacia, as an emblem of immortality, among the symbols of that degree, all of whose ceremonies are intended to teach us the great truth that “the life of man, regulated by morality, faith, and justice, will be rewarded at its closing hour by the prospect of Eternal Bliss.”‡ So, therefore, says Dr. Oliver, when the Master Mason exclaims “my name is Acacia,” it is equivalent to saying, “I have been in the grave – I have triumphed over it by rising from the dead—and being regenerated in the process, I have a claim to life everlasting.” (See Landmarks, ii., 151, note 27)

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Secondly, then, the acacia is a symbol of INNOCENCE. The symbolism here is of a peculiar and unusual character, depending not on any real analogy in the form or use of the symbol to the idea symbolized, but simply on a double or compound meaning of the word. For ἀκακία in the Greek language, signifies both the point in question and the moral quality of innocence or purity of life. In this sense the symbol refers, primarily, to him over whose solitary grave the acacia was planted, and whose virtuous conduct, whose integrity of life and fidelity to his trusts have ever been presented as patterns to the craft, and consequently to all Master Masons, who, by this interpretation of the symbol, are invited to emulate his example.

Hutchinson, indulging in his favourite theory of Christianizing Masonry, when he comes to this signification of the symbol, thus enlarges on the interpretation: “We Masons, describing the deplorable estate of religion under the Jewish law, speak in figures: ‘Her tomb was in the rubbish and filth cast forth of the temple, and ACACIA wove its branches over her monument;’ ἀκακία being the Greek word for innocence, or being free from sin; implying that the sins and corruptions of the old law, and devotees of the Jewish altar, had hid religion

from those who sought her, and she was only to be found where INNOCENCE survived, and under the banner of the divine Lamb ; and as to ourselves professing that we were to be distinguished by our ACACY, or as true ACACIANS in our religious faith and tenets.”

But, lastly, the acacia is to be considered as the symbol of INITIATION. This is by far the most interesting of its interpretations, and was, we have every reason to believe, the primary and original; the others being but incidental.

It leads us at once to the investigation of the significant fact that in all the ancient initiations and religious mysteries there was some plant peculiar to each, which was consecrated by its own esoteric meaning, and which occupied an important position in the celebration of the rites, so that the plant, whatever it might be, from its constant and prominent use in the ceremonies of initiation, came at length to be adopted as the symbol of that initiation.

Thus, the lettuce was the sacred plant which assumed the place of the acacia in the mysteries of Adonis. (See Lettuce) The lotus was that of the Brahmanical rites of India, and from them adopted by the Egyptians. (See Lotus) The Egyptians also revered the erica or heath; and the mistletoe was a mystical plant among the Druids. (See Erica and Mistletoe) And, lastly the myrtle performed the same office of symbolism in the mysteries of Greece that the lotus did in Egypt or the mistletoe among the Druids. (See Myrtle)