

THE RITE OF DISCALCEATION

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A candidate for initiation into a Masonic Lodge often finds odd those requirements which he must fulfill in order to do as have all good brothers and fellows who have gone this way before. Indeed, that preparation often remains a puzzle to him, since the ritualistic explanation is only partial. Not always does the newly made brother, bewildered by the new world into which he is thrust, investigate further to ascertain if all was told him which might have been; to learn a still further meaning to the ceremony and symbol which the passage in Ruth purports to make plain.

Those who read the fourth chapter of the immortal Book of Ruth will note especially the seventh and eighth verses: "Now this was the manner in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony in Israel". Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, "Buy it for thee. So he drew off his shoe."

"Redeeming" here means the taking back of recovery of land or property pledged for a debt; "changing" refers to the transfer of ownership. As both were then, as now, matters of importance, it is evident that the plucking off of the shoe, as a pledge of honor and fair dealing, was of equal importance, comparable with our swearing to our signatures to documents before a Notary Public.

Note that "To confirm all things a man plucked off his shoe..." not his shoes. Taking off one and handing it to him with whom a covenant was made was a symbol of sincerity. Removing both shoes signified quite another thought. These are separate and distinct symbols; in Freemasonry both are used, and it is wise to distinguish between the two, not to miss the beautiful implications of entering that place which is holy with both feet bare.

The Rite of Discalceation - from the Latin, *discalceatus*, meaning "unshod"-is world wide. Freemasonry's ritual of the Entered Apprentice Degree refers to the passage in Ruth. In the Master's Degree the reference is not verbal but an act which differs in meaning from that in the first degree.

In all probability Freemasonry takes this symbol from other sources than the Old Testament; obviously any system of teaching which is the result of the coming together of a thousand faiths, philosophies, rites, religions, guilds and associations, must have received so common a symbol from more than one source, although the Great Light does contain it. In the old Testament are several passages which make of the removal of shoes quite a different gesture than that described in the passage from Ruth.

EXODUS 3:5 states: "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." In JOSHUA 5:15 we find: "And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy." ECCLESIASTES 5:1 reads: "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God."

This association of the removal of footwear when treading holy ground is a fairly obvious symbol. Sandals or other footgear were used to protect not the ground, but the feet, both from injury and from filth. To wear such protections in holy places, by inference stated that the holy place was harmful to feet, or was dirty! It is similar in thought-content to the world wide custom of men removing hats in church. The knight removed his helmet in the presence of those he did not fear. He was safe in church; the removal of his protection against a blow was his acknowledgment that in a sanctuary not even an enemy would assail him.

We know the custom was wide spread, not confined to Israel, from many sources. Thus, Pythagoras instructed his disciples to "offer sacrifices with thy shoes off." In all eastern religious edifices the worshipper removes his shoes in order not to defile the temple with that which touches profane earth. Maimonides, expounder of ancient Jewish law, says: "It was not lawful for a man to come into the mountain of God's home with his shoes on his feet, or with his staff, or in his working garments, or with dust on his feet." The custom was found in Ethiopia, ancient Peru, the England of the Druids. Adam Clark thought the custom so general in the nations of antiquity that he quoted it as one of the proofs that the whole human race descended from one family.

The Rite of Discalceation becomes the more beautiful as we progress through the degrees. At first it is only a voluntary testimony of sincere and truthful intentions; later it is an act of humility, signifying that he who removes his shoes knows that he enters that which must not be defiled by anything unworthy.

The word "humility" must be strictly construed that it be not confused with its derivation, "humiliation." He who is humble acknowledges supremacy in another, or the greatness of a power of principle; he who is humiliated is made to feel unworthy, not in reverence to that which is greater than he, but for the personal aggrandizement of the humiliator. A man removes his hat on entering a home, in the presence of women, or in church, does it not as a symbol of humility, but of reverence. The worshipper removes his shoes on entering a holy place for the same reason. He who walks "neither barefoot nor shod" offers mute testimony-even though, as yet uninstructed, he knows it not - that he is sincere. Who walks with both feet bare signifies that he treads upon that which is hallowed.

Freemasonry does not stress in words this meaning of the Rite of Discalceation for very good reasons; throughout our system the explanation of our rites concerns always the simplest aspect. The fathers of our ritual were far too wise in the ways of the hearts of men to teach the abstruse first, and go then to the easy. Rather did they begin with that which is elementary; then, very often, our ritual leaves the initiate, if he will, to search further for himself. It is Freemasonry's recognition that man values most that for which he has to labor. But it is the less stressed meaning of the Rite which is of the greater importance. He is the better Freemason and the happier who digs for himself in the "rubbish of the temple" to uncover that which is there gloriously buried.

Is proof necessary, that behind the tiled door of any open Lodge is a holy place? Here it is! Freemasons teach that the Great Light is "dedicated to God, as the inestimable gift of God to man for the rule and guide of his faith"...In the Great Light we read (MATTHEW 18:20) "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Every Masonic Lodge is opened and closed in the name of God. According to this promise, therefore, no Lodge meets without the Great Architect being "in the midst of them." Consequently, the Lodge is holy ground. This being so, it may well be asked why all Freemasons do not remove their shoes when entering Lodge?

THEY DO, SYMBOLICALLY.

"Once a Freemason, always a Freemason." No Lodge member is required to repeat the obligations he once assumed, on every occasion at which he is present when a degree is being conferred. But it is well understood that the obligation is binding upon him for life. Every time he follows the old, old words in his mine, he reobligates himself. Whenever he sees a candidate initiated, consciously or unconsciously he himself is again initiated. Having once been taught that a candidate is prepared in a certain way because of a certain meaning in that preparation it is unnecessary to inconvenience him every time he comes to Lodge. If he is again so prepared, in his heart, he fulfills all the outward requirements.

While the promise and its fulfillment makes the Lodge holy ground, it is kept holy only if those who form it and conduct it, so revere it. Stone masons erect a temple to God, ministers dedicate it and worshippers consecrate it; but a desecrating hand, as in war, may unroof it, use it as a stable, or make of it a shamble.

A Grand Lodge can constitute, consecrate and dedicate a Lodge to the service of God and the memory of the Holy Sts. John, but to keep it holy is the high privilege of those who form it and attend it. Mackey beautifully puts the thought of the consecrated holiness of a lodge: "The rite of Discalceation is a symbol of reverence. It signifies, in the language of symbolism, that the spot which is about to be approached in this humble and reverential manner is consecrated to some holy purpose. Of all the degrees of Freemasonry, the third degree is the most important and sublime. The solemn lessons which it teaches, the sacred scene which it represents, and the impressive ceremonies with which it is conducted, are all calculated to inspire the mind with feelings of awe and reverence. And into the Master Mason's Lodge-this holy of holies of the Masonic Temple, where the solemn truths of death and immortality are inculcated, the aspirant on entering should purify his heart from every contamination, and remember, with a due sense of their symbolic application, those words that once broke upon the astonished ears of the old patriarch: "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

Holiness is not a thing, but an idea. So far as we know, the beasts of the field reverence no place as holy, for they have no consciousness of God. The sacred words of the Great Light are holy to us for what they teach and mean: because of whence they came. The paper, the leather and the ink which form a Bible are no more holy than the same materials formed into a telephone directory. The stones of which a church, the wood from which the pulpit is carved, the metal from which the Cross is made, are only the familiar stones and trees and minerals, used by men for a thousand purposes. The cotton and the dye which form the Stars and Stripes are but the fruit of plants. Book, Temple and Flag are holy to us because of our reverence for the ideas for which they stand. They are holy to us because we make them holy, keep them holy, think of them as holy, cherish them as holy.

So must it be with our Lodges. What is a Lodge? A certain number of brethren; a charter or warrant; the Three Great Lights- and an underlying idea, a faith, a belief, a Mystic Tie, never seen of men, but the stronger for its intangibility. To many the Lodge is the room in the Temple in which brethren meet; walls of stone or wood or plaster; floor of carpet or linoleum; some seats; an Altar...and yet, by common consent of all who believe in the power of the spirit which consecrates when the Lodge is formed, holy because of what it means.

The worshipper in eastern lands removes his shoes before he enters his temple as a symbol that he knows his flesh needs no protection from that which it will there touch: a symbol that he bring not within its precincts any filth which might defile it. The Master Mason, symbolically removing his shoes before entering his Lodge, knows that here will he find that holiness which is in the promise of God unto David, the holiness of the Book on the Altar, the very presence of the Great Architect, through whom the Lodge receives the greatest of His Blessing to man: friendship. But he also does symbolically remove his shoes that he may carry nothing "of a metallic nature" into the Lodge to defile it.

Men can - and some do - defile their Lodges. He who brings within it evil or contentious thoughts of his brethren, defiles it. In more than one jurisdiction in the world the brethren are asked at every meeting if there be any not at peace with their brethren. If such there are, they are required to retire and return not until their differences are reconciled, literally carrying out the instructions: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee: Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way: first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (MATTHEW 5:23-24)

The Mason who comes to Lodge to get something from it, rather than to give something to it, may defile it by that selfish attitude. Men get from Freemasonry by giving. He who brings pride to place and power to his Lodge, and serves only for the empty honor of title or jewel, defiles that which is holy as surely as did those money changers whom the Great Teacher drove from the Temple. He who assumes to work in his Lodge, but labors carelessly, in a slovenly manner, to the desecration of ceremonies that were ancient when his ancestors were not yet born, defiles his Lodge by his tacit assumption that his convenience is of greater importance than the

teachings of Freemasonry.

Alas, that so many symbolically wear shoes in the holy place, by the simple process of thinking little of it, attending it but seldom, regarding it but as a club or association of men who meet together to pass the time away! Such brethren may indeed have been entered, passed, and raised, but, uninspired, uninterested and unhelpful, they leave, seldom or never to return. To such as these the Lodge cannot be holy; although charitable thought would argue that their failures cannot defile.

Luckily for us all, the majority of Freemasons who are constant attendants at Lodge - the brethren who do the work, carry the load, attend to the charity, form the committees, put on the degrees, go on foot and out of their way to help, aid and assist - the brethren, in other words, who work for and are content with a Master's Wages - these do keep the Lodge holy; these do think of the Three Great Lights upon the Altar as the Sanctum Sanctorum; these do, indeed, put off their shoes from off their feet, in humble and thankful knowledge that the place in which they stand is holy ground.