

THE MANY WASHINGS OF THE HIGH PRIEST

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In the Traditional History of the Third degree, we are told that no one may enter the Sanctum Sanctorum, not even the High Priest but once a year and he not then until after many washings and purifications against the Great day of expiation of sin. It is interesting to look at the hidden meanings contained here and what lessons are being conveyed to us.

The Sanctum Sanctorum was actually the Holy of Holies in the Temple, separated from the Holy Place where all sacrifices were offered by a veil. The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant in which was placed the two tablets of stone upon which was written the Ten Commandments. There was also the Golden Altar of Incense as opposed to the Altar of Burnt Offerings which was situated in the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could pass through this veil into the Holy of Holies and no one else. This was done once a year in the Temple and was to seek forgiveness for any sins committed in the Temple during the previous year.

The date for this was the 10th day of the Hebrew month Tishri. On the first two days of this month we celebrate the Jewish New Year or Rosh Hashanah a name many of you are familiar with. These two days begin the ten days of Penitence during which we insert special prayers in our services even today requesting forgiveness for misdeeds of the past year. The tenth and final day is the Day of Atonement or as many of you know Yom Kippur. This day is marked by a total fast for at least 25 hours, not wearing leather shoes or anything else leather, and refraining from washing or anointing ourselves. It was on this date that the High Priest went through these many washings alluded to in the Traditional History and entered the Holy of Holies.

The first washing was done where the High priest completely immersed himself in the ritual pool of water and upon exiting would present a sin offering for himself and members of his immediate family. He would confess his sins over this offering which was a he-goat one year old. This offering was burnt on the Altar of Burnt Offerings. He would then wash again for the second time, and confess the sins for himself, family, and the entire Priesthood for any inaccuracies during the year for presenting sacrifices incorrectly. The third washing then followed and this time the High Priest confessed for himself, family, the Priesthood, and the entire congregation of Israel. In all there were seven washings that the High priest went through.

After confessing the sins for all, the High priest now began the ceremony for the Temple itself. He would take the blood from the sin offering as well as a shovelful of incense. He would now pass through the Veil into the Holy of Holies and lay the incense on the Golden Altar. This caused a large smoke screen to rise from the Altar preventing the High Priest from gazing upon the Divine Presence which would have resulted in his

immediate death. The High Priest would then sprinkle the blood on the curtain on the Ark seven times starting from the top and working his way down. After doing that, he would exit the Holy of Holies and dash the remaining blood against the base of the Altar of Burnt Offerings. Tradition informs us that if the High Priest was unworthy to perform this service, he would die in the Holy of Holies. Since none else was allowed to enter it, a rope would be tied around the High Priest's waist so that his body could be pulled out and removed from the Temple. We are also told that this never happened to any High Priest.

There is a most important lesson to be learned from this for all Masons. The washings and confessions of the High Priest were to purify him before the Almighty so that he would be worthy to perform this ceremony each year. We, too, must "purify" ourselves before the G.A.O.T.U. so that we are deemed worthy to be Masons and to wear the regalia of a Mason in the proper spirit. We must constantly strive and work toward the goal of being unblemished by sin so that we may set the proper example for others to emulate. While this may be a nearly impossible task, it should not stop us from reaching out for that ultimate goal so that we may call ourselves true Masons.