

What is the True Meaning of the Fellow Craft Degree?

By Scott A. Shoemaker
Mt. Hermon Lodge No. 263

Perhaps the most significant symbol of Fellow Craft degree is the staircase leading to the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple, an emblem open to many interpretations. The winding nature of the staircase is often seen as an allegory for man's own life, with many twists and turns obscuring the future. The number of steps in each section is also symbolic, as amplified in the lectures of this degree: three principle officers of the lodge, five orders of architecture, and seven liberal arts. These symbols are well known among Masons. What if the staircase contained a deeper level of symbolism, one not alluded to in the Middle Chamber Lecture? If we consider the number of steps in the various segments of the staircase, a different lesson emerges.

The first two segments of the famous staircase, those containing three and five steps, suggest a significant ratio when compared to each other. If the ratio 5:3 is reduced to the simplest terms, it becomes 1.6:1, a ratio known as the Golden Section. The Golden Section has been used by architects and builders for the planning of structures since the earliest days of civilization because of its enduring beauty. Buildings as diverse as the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Parthenon in Athens, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and the United Nations Building in New York emphasize this proportion in their construction.

Comparison of the second and third segments, those containing five and seven steps, reveals a similar proportion. In this case, the ratio is 2.3:1. This ratio manifests itself in many of ancient Greece's most enduring structures. Many details of the famous Parthenon demonstrate this ratio, as do other temples. The Temple of Aphaea at Aegina is one such example. The Temple of Zeus Labraundos is another.

Like so many aspects of Masonry, there is a higher and nobler speculative purpose to these symbols as well. If a noble lesson is to be taken from these symbols, perhaps it is a reminder that a moral existence is one lived in the correct proportion. Freemasonry does not prescribe a single golden proportion for every man. The proportions which are correct, true, and beautiful for one man's life may not fit well for another. Freemasonry understands this and simply asks that each brother live a considered and well-measured life, and reminds us that a multitude of yardsticks are available to measure our individual successes.

Excerpted from: Climbing King Solomon's Staircase:
Numbers, Ratio, and Symbolism in Masonic Ritual