

6. Discuss the meaning and significance of the triangle, the cube, the triangular pedestal, and the cubical but vaulted shape of each chamber, which gives it much the shape of a broached thurnel.

Finding The Broached Thurnel

Two shapes that are integral parts of the symbolism of the Thirteenth Degree are the square and the triangle. The square (and its three-dimensional equivalent, the cube) figures most prominently in the drama of the degree--and hearkens back to some of the symbolic teachings of the First Degree--while the triangle is found in both the drama, as well as the regalia, of the degree. I will first discuss some of the symbolic meanings of both symbols, and then provide some comments on the combination of the two symbols into one figure.

One of the first times we encounter a square, or cube, in our Masonic journey is in the lecture of the First Degree, when we are taught about the two ashlar, one "rough" and one "perfect." An ashlar is a stone used in a building, and the Rough Ashlar represents "man in his unfinished state," while the Perfect Ashlar is a stone which has been finished using the Working Tools of the Entered Apprentice (the Twenty-Four Inch Gauge and Common Gavel) and then tried by the Working Tools of the Fellow Craft (Plumb, Square, and Level). After the new Mason has gone through the degrees and had some time to reflect on the experience, it eventually dawns on him that *he is* the ashlar to be worked on, as well as the workman who does the finishing. His goal, of course, is to become worthy of the premature honor he received in the First Degree when he was placed in the Northeast Corner of the lodge as the youngest Entered Apprentice. Although not yet a finished and perfect ashlar, he has begun building his Masonic edifice, and so the cornerstone is symbolically laid.

The cube is a fitting symbol of perfection because, at most, nine edges can be seen at one time, representing the perfect number, three times three. In the Royal Arch of Solomon this number is echoed in the nine vaults through which we must symbolically descend to reach an understanding of ourselves and the Deity. The ritual of the degree specifically states that the Temple of Enoch, built over the hidden vaults, was made of unhewn stones, again reminding us of the rough ashlar. Descending through the vaults represents the process of self-exploration we undergo in the quest for Truth. At the end of the journey, in the final chamber, we discover the perfect ashlar in the cube of agate. Thus, the rubble that is strewn about the ninth vault is representative of the "vices and superfluities of this life" that we are taught to break off with the common gavel in the First Degree. Only when we complete this process (if ever!) can we view the Ineffable Word.

In addition to perfection, the square also represents earthly things, or the material world. Just as a Masonic lodge room represents the world, extending from north to south and east to west, so too does the square represent the four cardinal directions, as well as the four traditional physical elements: earth, air, fire, and water. This understanding of the square as representing the world is exemplified in the almost nonsensical phrase, "the four corners of the globe."

Turning to the triangle, we find in it a common Masonic symbol for perfection. The triangle is such a common Masonic symbol because it is a visual representation of the many triads found in Freemasonry. The equilateral triangle, found on the apron and jewel of this degree, is a symbol of Deity, or "Infinite Wisdom, Infinite Power, and Infinite Harmony" (*A Bridge to Light*, 83). The three pillars of Craft Masonry, denoted Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty, have become, in the Thirteenth Degree, Wisdom, Power, and Harmony. The triangle is also a symbol of infinity, because the three angles always add up to 180 degrees. An "angle" of 180 degrees is a straight line, stretching toward infinity.

Now let us turn to a composite symbol, made up of a square surmounted by a triangle. In three dimensions this shape becomes a cube with a pyramid on top of it. This figure is called a Broached Thurnel, and in many non-American jurisdictions is considered one of the "movable jewels" of the lodge, and takes the place of the perfect ashlar. Elongated it is the shape of an Egyptian obelisk and, significantly to American Masons, the Washington Monument.

As a two-dimensional figure, a triangle on top of a square is reminiscent of the shape of an Entered Apprentice's apron. The fact that the vaults encountered in the Thirteenth Degree take the shape of a broached thurnel suggests that we ought to use the lessons of Craft Masonry as we strive to explore ourselves and our relationship to God. Symbolically, because a triangle represents Deity and a square represents the material world, this shape represents the importance of keeping spiritual things above earthly things. We see a similar meaning in the Master's Jewel, or Square and Compasses, that is found on every altar of Freemasonry. As the candidate moves from the First Degree to the Second Degree and on to the Third Degree, the triangular shape of the Compasses moves forward and finally supersedes the Square. This is symbolic of the journey of life: once a man has taken care of his physical and material needs in youth and manhood, he turns to spiritual matters and the care of his soul in old age. We are also taught in the rituals of the Blue Lodge that the Square is "dedicated to the Master, and the Compasses to the Craft." Thus, as we see the Compasses/Triangle come forward we learn to put the needs of others before ourselves.

Another meaning of the broached thurnel is the importance of striking a balance between care of the body (represented by the square) and care of the mind and intellect (represented by the triangle), with that part of man which is closest to Deity--the mind--on top. Yet another version of the broached thurnel makes an appearance in the final vault of the Royal Arch of Solomon, where the three Masters found the Ineffable Word, in the form of the pedestal of alabaster, agate, and gold. In the drama of the Thirteenth Degree, the cube is made to represent agate, further linking its symbolic meaning to earthly things. As a perfect ashlar, the cube of the pedestal shows that he who symbolically reaches the ninth vault has broken off the superfluous parts of his character in the attempt to "know thyself." The triangular plate on top of the cube is made of gold, representing the sun, and the light of reason. A gold triangle, then, is symbolic of the light of knowledge and wisdom one gains in the search for an understanding of and relationship with God.

So what does this symbol ultimately teach us that we can use as a practical application? In other words, what is the "take-away value" of a square with a triangle on top of it? This figure teaches us that as Masons we are to remember that the spiritual and intellectual pursuits of life are more important than the pursuit of earthly gain or physical pleasures. Remember that the ancient Greeks exhorted man to "know thyself." Indeed, many ancient mystical and esoteric traditions, including (but, of course, not limited to) Kabbalah, the Tarot, and the degrees of the Scottish Rite, are tools we can use to facilitate our process of self-examination and -discovery. By doing so, we become closer to God, for we were created in His image. The drama of the Royal Arch of Solomon simply makes this process overt. Of the three Masters who discover the trapdoor among the rubble of an old temple, two attempt to plumb the depths of the vaults, but are turned back by obstacles. Only the third makes it all the way down to the chamber containing the Lost Word, thereby completing what was begun in the Third Degree. (It is interesting to note that the Word is lost in the Third Degree. The next nine degrees are the 4th through the 12th. The Lost Word is then recovered in the 13th Degree. One might argue that the 4th-12th Degrees themselves represent the nine vaults, and the 13th is the final chamber.) This teaches us that there are those who recognize that there is more to life than the building up of material wealth--which will, in time, crumble to ruins and leave us unsatisfied. But just because you have an idea that there "has to be more," doesn't mean that you will actually discover what that "More" is. Those who meet the first obstacle in their search may simply turn back. Those who push past that obstacle, but encounter a second, may then turn back. But those who meet every obstacle--often in the darkness of their psyche, or the blackness of spiritual doubt--and overcome them and continue the search, they will be rewarded for their efforts. The gold of knowledge and enlightenment--more precious than any metal--is reserved for those few who truly seek it.