



The Ear of Corn and Shibboleths

**TOMATO, TO-MAH-TO; Shibboleths
Beyond the Craft**

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The Ear of Corn and Shibboleths

That sore battle, when so many died
 Without reprieve, adjudged to death
 For want of well pronouncing Shibboleth!
 --John Milton

From our Ritual we are told that the word Shibboleth, which means Plenty, is represented by an Ear of Corn growing near or suspended over a running stream.

The Masonic Ear of Corn, in King Solomon's day, represented part of the wages reaped from the Master Masons' labours.

Today, it is used as a symbol of that time, long ago, mostly during the dedication, constitution and consecration of a new lodge and in the laying of cornerstones. At those times, the Masonic Ear of Corn represents the fruit of our labours, our sacrifices and all we have done to deserve them.

Corn, wine and oil have been associated with "the Harvest" and "the Plenty" since King Solomon's time... and long before.

When King Solomon requested of King Tyre the wood (cedar, fir and algum) which came from Lebanon, for which to build the Temple (Chronicles 2:8), he promised payment of wheat, barley, wine and oil (Chronicles 2:10).

So, now, the Masonic Ear of Corn represents charity to the less fortunate, as in these excerpts from the Bible.

"When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands." (Deuteronomy 24:19)

"When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow." (Deuteronomy 24:20)

"When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow." (Deuteronomy 24:21)

The Sheaf of Corn represented the "coin of the realm" to our ancient brethren, the people of Israel. While we are paid in pounds and pennies today, corn, wine and oil were the wages of the fruits of their labours.

Most Masonic scholars believe that the Masonic Ear of Corn in our Masonic ritual actually represents the more generic term, meaning "grain", in general.

This is why you sometimes hear mention in the various Rituals across the globe of the Ear of Wheat, the Sheaf of Barley or the Ear or Sheaf of Grain, used somewhat interchangeably.

The King James Version of the Bible mentions the word "corn" over 100 times. Whether this was a generic term to represent any grain used in breadstuffs or whether the name of the exact type of the grain was lost in the many translations of the Bible, is unknown.

The word "Shibboleth", (in Hebrew: Sihlet-Shabioth) was used to distinguish friend from foe. It is the interpretation of the test word used by the troops of Jephthah to distinguish the Ephraimites after the battle on the banks of the Jordan.

The reason it was used as the test word is because the Ephraimites' dialect was somewhat different than the troops of Jephthah and if they pronounced the word incorrectly, they failed the test.

Now a "Shibboleth" has two meanings: A place to cross the water (a waterford) or Corn (or, generically, grain), which is an emblem of the germination force of the seed.

However, in general it is believed that the Ear of Corn symbolizes the plentiful fruits of the Earth and those who are allowed to partake of them through hard work and knowledge.

So, as you leave the Fellow Craft to become a Master Mason, you receive the "plenty" when you: symbolically cross the passes of the Jordan, learn the correct pronunciation of Shibboleth, and pause within your own Middle Chamber.

In the book "the Craft and its Symbols", page 84, Allen E. Roberts states; "As Hiram prayed daily for guidance from his God before drawing the designs that would set the craftsmen to work, so must we. ... Each Mason becomes his own architect.

Each supervises the building of that "temple not made by hands." Each builds into his structure beauty, harmony and knowledge to the extent he is willing to work.

So the next time you contemplate the Ear of Corn, remember your ancient brethren, their hard work to receive the "plenty" as their wages and then,... as now, because of that hard work, the Masonic charity your brethren is able to provide to the stranger, the fatherless, the widow and those who are less fortunate.

Anyway, onto the "Shibboleth" itself:

A shibboleth is defined as any word, or indeed any usage of language, that identifies one's region of origin or identifies one as a member of a group. For us Freemasons, the concept of shibboleth is important. Of course it forms a part of our ritual, and our fellows are taught about an historical occurrence in which the use of shibboleths originated. In actuality, it is very likely that shibboleths of some kind have been in use since the

dawn of Man, but certainly the story found in the book of Judges must be one of the first recordings of the practice. In our order, the newly admitted fellow is told of the story, but he is never really told why it is important and is simply left to wonder about the significance of the word, and I suppose, the event itself.

Jephthah's shibboleth is by no means the only example we encounter of these verbal tests. Even today in the North American state of Kansas, the word "rural" is a shibboleth of sorts and if one pronounces it by dropping the middle "r" and ignoring the last syllable – rendering it as "rule" – one proclaims himself a true Western Kansas man, and not at all an Eastern Kansas fop.

There are many examples of these harmless shibboleths and our daily lives are full of them.

More ominous, however, are the military applications of this test-language, and more often than not they are used, as Jephthah used them, to determine life or death.

Anyway, a few examples:

In the year 1002, Saxons tested Danes with the phrase "Chichester Church," a phrase which certainly would have excluded Americans, as well. In 1282 the Sicilians revolted against the occupying French, and many French men-at-arms were murdered.

The Sicilians used the local word for "chick pea" (cicera) as the test word, as it was difficult for the French to properly pronounce it.

In the early years of the 16th Century, the Netherlands were embroiled in fierce factional fighting between various warlords, bandits and foreign troops. One of these warrior chiefs was a

Frisian strongman named Piers Gerlofs Donia. According to legend, his soldiers used the shibboleth "Bûter, brea, en griene tsiis; wa't dat net sizze kin, is gjin oprjochte Fries", ("Butter, bread, and green cheese, whoever can't say that is no sincere Fries"). The phrase worked as a shibboleth between the Dutch, German and Frisian pronunciations of "butter, bread, and green cheese." In Frisian, these sound like our English pronunciation. But the Dutch would say "Boter, brood, en groene kaas", while the German would pronounce it "Butter, Brot und grüner Käse." The wrong answer meant no green cheese for you and probably a pole axe to your Uncle Ned.

There are several examples of the practical use of shibboleths among the Arabs.

In 1840 Ibrahim Pasha, commander of Egyptian rebels fighting against Turkish rule gathered his forces, many of them Syrians, who were press-ganged to join the rebels. Ibrahim Pasha fought the Turks in the Lebanon, and he was successful at first. However, with the assistance of British, French and Russian naval forces, the Turks put Ibrahim Pasha to flight.

He turned about and retreated, coming down through Aleppo and Damascus and crossing the Jordan at the same fords that the Ephraimites had crossed, and met with such disaster in mispronouncing a word.

Now, in all retreating armies there are stragglers, and many of them. As I have intimated, the Syrians hated the Egyptians, and when the soldiers, the stragglers, came to the ford the Syrians would ask them: "Are you a Shami (Syrian)?" "Yes, indeed," the Egyptian would say to gain favour and perhaps food. "Then say Jamel (camel)." "Gamel," the Egyptian would inadvertently say. Now there is no "J" sound in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic. The letter that is written the same is in the Syrian dialect sounded like a soft "J," really like the French "J," whereas the Egyptians always pronounce it like a hard "G," and accordingly said "Gamel." ... So the Syrian soldiers said "Jamel," they said,

"Pass on, my brother"; but when the Egyptians said "Gamel," they said, "Iktul 'ameru," (cut off his life!) and they killed them just as the Gileadites slew the Ephraimites, three thousand years before at the same place.

Shibboleths, it seem, run deep near the Jordan. Seventy-eight years after Ibrahim Pasha's rout, Lord Allenby's forces re-enacted the scene with retreating Turkish forces by the famous fords, and the Arabic word for onion (بصل – Buzszle) became a matter of life or death;

The Turks in the Great War drafted the Syrians into their army and most of them were very unwilling soldiers. They were not in sympathy with the Germano-Turkish aims and plans. When Allenby made that wonderfully complete crumpling up of the Ottoman army in Palestine and crossed the Jordan in September, 1918, many who did not get caught in the net at first tried to escape by crossing from the east of the Jordan to the west side by these same fords of the famous river. There they met many Syrians, some soldiers and some civilians, and each fleeing soldier was asked whether he were Syrian or a Turk. If he said he was a Syrian, they said to him: "Say Buzszle"; and if he were a Turk he would say "bussel," for the Turkish language makes no difference in pronouncing the "Sod" and the "Seen," which are both varieties of the letter "S."

The "Sod" is a heavy "S" sounded with the tip of the tongue down below the roots of the front teeth and the Turks pronounce it just like an ordinary "S." The Syrian ear is very discriminating to these sounds; and when they heard the word for onion come hissing out instead of lisping out like a tongue-tied child, they said "Iktul 'ameru" (cut off his life), and they slew many Turks at the fords of the Jordan.

The New World also has its share of shibboleths used in war. In 1937, Rafael Trujillo, the military dictator of the Dominican Republic, launched a pogrom against Haitians living in that

country. That purge, known as The Parsley Massacre, resulted in an estimated 17,000 to 35,000 Haitians murdered by death squads.

“What is this?” the death squad commander would ask, holding a sprig of parsley. If the person could pronounce the word – perejil - with the correctly rolled Spanish “r,” he stood a good chance of survival, if not, death was the inevitable result.

Our ritual does not tell us why shibboleths are important, but we can venture a guess. Among other things, they demonstrate a sense of belonging, and a means of detecting those who do not belong. Our ritual is full of them, and we are everyday reminded how to know who is a Mason and who is not.

Thankfully, none of them involve the application of a pole axe.

The more you know, the more you grow within the Craft.