



## Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

### A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

**“Be on your  
metal”**

## **'Be on your metal...'**

The Initiate stands somewhat bemused in the North East Corner. The evening has been long and confusing. Earnest words continue to flow round and about him. His attention however is suddenly riveted '*...Secondly, to evince to the Brethren that you had neither money nor metallic substance about you for – if you had – the ceremony of your Initiation...must have been repeated.*' (Would he no longer be allowed 'Heavy Metal' on his iPod - he muses)

Confusingly, only a short while later in the ceremony, he is handed a quite obviously metallic chisel during an explanation of its moral symbolism. As the meeting closes a set of the answers is provided for his next Ceremony. In an early question he finds he will be asked to describe the mode of his preparation: '*I was divested of metal and hoodwinked...*' Our Initiate is an intelligent man. He asks himself in a society of such high moral principles what this obsession with metal is all about ...but no one ever tells him? One might ask, softly, who actually knows?

The Preston Lectures of the late C18 provided one commonly accepted interpretation (1<sup>st</sup> Lecture, Section ii, Clause 1):

***Why deprived of metal?*** For three reasons: first reason, that no weapon may be introduced into the Lodge to disturb the harmony; second reason, that metal, though of value could have no influence on our initiation; third reason, that after our initiation metal could make no distinction amongst Masons; the order being founded on peace, virtue and friendship.

The embargo though has been on *everything* metallic. Let us look at a Ritual of 1742:

*'...he is deprived of all metal articles he may have about him such as buckles, buttons, rings, snuffboxes, etc. There are some lodges where they (even) deprived a man of his clothes if they are ornamented with 'gallant' [a gold or silver thread]*

Given our operative traditions of craftsmen with trowel in one hand and sword in the other there seem to be apparent inconsistencies here. If the above were the only reasons for excluding metal then a simple ban on weapons and potential gifts of money or jewellery would surely serve our purposes admirably. There must be more to it.

A Worshipful Master is instructed to seek guidance within the VSL. Let us follow that excellent advice.

Exodus Chapter 20, verse 25 '*...and if thou wilt make me an altar of stone thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it thou hast polluted it...*'

1 Kings Chapter 6, verse 7 '*...and the house, when it was in building was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house whilst it was in building*'

There seems to be a clear link here between the absence of iron and the sacredness of a Temple or other holy place. Certainly in the First Millennium BC base metal was widely considered the ultimate pollutant and suspicion both of its use and of those who worked it are to be found in the legends and folklore of many cultures throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Europe and Scandinavia (e.g. Wagner's Ring Cycle, the Norse Legends etc.) This cultural sense of pollution provides the basis of explanations more sophisticated than Preston's given by many authorities for the exclusion of metal in a seemingly mystical ceremony like Initiation.

I would suggest though that there is a more powerful historical reason. It is to be found in the pages of the Prophet Samuel, and although I have not seen it quoted elsewhere, it becomes very relevant.

1 Samuel Ch. 13 v. 19-23 *Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said: 'The Hebrews must not make swords or spears for themselves'. So all the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen their ploughshares, mattocks, axes or sickles The charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the ploughshares and for the mattocks; and one-third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and setting the goads. So on the day of the battle neither sword nor spear was to be found in possession of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan...*

While brass could be worked relatively easily, wrought-iron was the hardest known form of metal for several millennia. Its production required great craft skills and, given the high temperatures and special flux required, the transformation of iron ore into pig-iron, wrought-iron and finally a hardened cutting edge involved lengthy personal experience and a judgement in tempering that was jealously guarded - and normally only handed on from father to son within a fixed or city environment.

It follows that nomadic pastoral communities like the Twelve Tribes of Israel would have neither tradition nor knowledge of working iron. (In the interests of their own defence the Philistines would surely have made certain that it remained that way.)

We know from the C13 construction of Salisbury Cathedral that wrought-iron chisels, saws and axes used to shape soft stone or oak required re-sharpening every 15 to 20 minutes and for the harder stones this might be as frequently as every 8 to 10 minutes. For continuous work therefore many metal smiths were required on site to make and refurbish metal tools on demand.

As we see above metal smiths available around Jerusalem could only be Philistine. However as they worshipped 'false gods' and idols their presence would be objectionable to the Israelite priests, polluting the purity of their place of worship. If the smiths could not be close to the Temple metal tools could not be used on site.

The problem was resolved by preparing the stones off site (or in the quarries) for re-assembly at the Temple and, as metal trowels could not be used to lay mortar, with dry joints. This required remarkably tight tolerances. (Evidence of their precision can be seen in the West Wall at Jerusalem where prayers, to this day, are written and slipped into the narrow crevices.) The closest a Philistine would be permitted to prepare the stone was determined by the noise of his hammer - If it could be heard – he was too close!

The conclusion then may be a simple one. Speculative Freemasonry uses the imagery of the building of the Temple at Jerusalem to assist in a Mason's moral development. As Philistine metal polluted construction of the original Temple so means were found for its exclusion.

The removal of metal in our own ceremony is perhaps analogous and becomes necessary to highlight to the Initiate a need to consciously eliminate, not metal, but those influences in his own life that might restrict (or 'pollute') construction of his own moral temple.