



“The Tale of the Seafaring Man”

Lodge Presentation:

*The following short article is written with the intention to be read within an open Lodge, or in fellowship, to all the members in attendance. This article is appropriate to be presented to all **Master Masons**. **Master Masons** should be invited to attend the meeting where this is presented. Following this article is a list of discussion questions which should be presented immediately following the presentation of the article.*

The Tale of the Seafaring Man

The Seafaring Man is often the first part in any degree that a new Mason learns. It is short. He responds to questions so the cues are easy. It is also the one time during our solemn ritual that many lodges allow a bit of light humor to creep into our work. The seafaring man appears twice: once in conversation with the fleeing ruffians and once with the search party.

I was once asked by a young Mason, “Could the Sea Faring Man have made his round trip to Ethiopia in the time allotted?” In other words, could he have sailed from Joppa to Ethiopia, changed cargo, and sailed back within 15 days? The simple logical answer is no. Before the building of the Suez Canal he would have had to sail across the Mediterranean, out the straits of Gibraltar, and completely around the continent of Africa to a land locked country and then sail back by the same route. A trip of over 12,000 nautical miles. It takes a modern day aircraft carrier over three weeks to circumnavigate the continent of Africa.

However, and in Masonry there always seems to be a “however.” However, during the late renaissance and throughout the enlightenment Ethiopia was not so much a country but was the term used for all of Northern Africa which bordered the Mediterranean Ocean. More specifically the region that today is Tunisia. The port of Tunis juts out into the Mediterranean just off of Sicily. Tunis was known as Tarshish and was previously known in Antiquity as Carthage.

Knowing this, does it make the trip possible? If the Seafaring Man did indeed put to sea immediately, it might be. It is 30 miles from Jerusalem to Joppa so it would have taken the ruffians one day to walk to Joppa. A long day but doable. The small boats of the time averaged about 4 ½ knots. However, there are a number of factors: time of year, currents, prevailing wind, and tide just to name a few. So at certain times of the year the trip from Joppa to Tarshish could be made in seven days and seven days back. So the search party could have fell in with him on the 15th day. However, most times of the year the trip would take closer to two weeks each direction. So it is possible for the seafaring man to have already returned to Joppa but not very likely. It also does not give the search party time to return from Joppa to Jerusalem.



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As in so much of Masonry the true importance of the story may not be what it at first seems. The importance of the story may not lie with the sailor as much as his destination. Tarshish was the furthest port on the trade routes that passed through Jerusalem. Literally making it the ends of the Earth. The very place a band of ruffians would want to flee to.

The voyage from Joppa to Tarshish may also be significant. The story of Jonah has Jonah fleeing God’s wrath by sailing from Joppa to Tarshish. Jonah had been in Tarshish when God calls on him to go to Nineveh and warn them of their impending doom. Jonah flees in the opposite direction. A storm arises along the rough and rugged coast. Jonah is thrown into the sea and swallowed by a giant fish. There he must stay until he admits his crime against God. A story of no escape from God’s wrath over wickedness. The ruffians are also fleeing from certain punishment and death and while not the belly of a fish, but in the clefts of the rock, they make their confessions. After speaking with the seafaring man the ruffians speaking amongst themselves realize that they cannot make their escape by sea as they will end up cast away. They then flee into the country realizing that they will eventually have to face the consequences.

The other curious thing about Tarshish as the destination is its chief export. Which at that time was metals particularly bronze. Hiram Abiff was not a stone mason, as many would suspect, but a worker in bronze. We are told in the Fellowcraft degree that he cast the two great pillars on the clay grounds. The seafaring man was going to pick up supplies for the master to continue his work. Work nearly completed. Work cut short by those who sought passage with him but not having what was needed the honest seafaring man turned them away.

Suspicious characters!

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Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons of Wisconsin



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Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions are written to be presented immediately following the presentation of the topic above. There is no right or wrong answers to these questions, they are designed to promote thought and engage all the members that are present in conversation. Take care that the presentation of the topic and the discussion questions does not exceed 30 minutes. The presenter can present any part of the questions below, or any additional questions, he feels is appropriate.

- Does it really matter if the trip could be made in the time frame of the story?
- Masonry is centuries old. What other terms may have changed their meaning, like Ethiopia being North Africa and not a land locked country? Even the change in technology with the Suez Canal?
- Could the story have ties with the story of Jonah? (The story appears in the writings of all three major religions.)
- What was Hiram Abiff's real job? Where else is metal work mentioned in our ritual?
- Is it significant the Solomon supplied the stone, Hiram of Tyre supplied the lumber (Cedars of Lebanon), and Hiram Abiff worked in metal?
- Could the Seafaring man just be a literary device used to show the passage of time and move the story along? What other parts of the ritual may do the same thing?
- During the degree in many lodges the conversion with the Seafaring man is a time of levity and humor. Is this acceptable? To what limits?
- In some lodges the seafaring man is outfitted in a rain coat, captain's hat, or sailor suit does this add or detract from the degree? Does it matter?
- While the Seafaring man has very few lines is this a good starting role for a brother interested in helping with ritual?
- Why does “suspicious characters” usually bring about laughter?