

# Initiation, Mystery and Salvation: *The Way of Rebirth*

Dennis V. Chornenky  
President, Masonic Restoration Foundation

It is the intention of this essay to show that the terms initiation, mystery and salvation are deeply interrelated within the context of the teachings of the ancient Graeco-Roman mystery schools. The main thesis is that the three terms combine to create a sacred triad which forms the esoteric teaching of rebirth found in most initiatic organizations.

A proper understanding of the words initiation, mystery and salvation is not an easy task, however, and requires serious examination of their application in the ancient rituals of mystery cults, the way in which their meaning was described by ancient thinkers, including the biased exposes of early Christian critics, and their etymology<sup>1</sup>. While it is difficult to determine exactly what occurred within the rituals of the ancient mystery schools, numerous mystical texts and ancient commentaries regarding the lessons taught within the mystery schools are available to us, which along with etymological knowledge can provide useful insight. As a precaution, however, it should be noted that most interpretive endeavors to categorically attach meaning to ancient terms and usages must necessarily be speculative and should not be treated as anything more than stepping stones on the path of discovery.

The term "initiation" comes from the Latin word *initiare*, which is a late Hellenistic translation of the Greek verb *myein*. The main Greek term for initiation, *myesis*, is also derived from the verb *myein*, which means "to close." It refers to the closing of the eyes which was possibly symbolic of entering into darkness prior to reemerging and receiving light and to the closing the lips which was possibly a reference to the vow of silence taken by all initiates. Another Greek term for initiation was *telete*. In his *Immortality of the Soul* Plutarch writes that "the soul at the moment of death, goes through the same experiences as those who are initiated into the great mysteries. The word and the act are similar: we say *telentai* (to die) and *telestai* (to be initiated)." The fact that *myein* means "to close" and its translation, *initiare*, is derived from the earlier *inire*, which means to "to go in" or "to begin," further suggests that a notion of endings and beginnings was inherent to the ancient understanding of these terms.

The term "mystery," *mysterion* in Greek, is also derived from the Greek verb *myein*. The plural *mysteria*, was first used in application to the Eleusinian Mysteries<sup>2</sup>. The Greek terms for initiation, *myesis* and *telete*, also became first widely used at the Eleusinian cult of Demeter. It should be noted that while the modern meaning of the term mystery seems simply to mean something unknown, to the ancients *mysterion* meant something divine, deeply profound and worth knowing.

The term "salvation" comes from the Greek word *soteria* which is derived from the word *soter* meaning "savior." It appears that the most important gods were all

worshipped in search of salvation. Egyptian gods in general were referred to by the Greeks as *soteres*, or saviors. And there are numerous references in primary source materials, of gods "saving" the initiate from moral vices or physical dangers. As the common era progressed, the concept of salvation became more closely identified with Christianity, as the main role of Jesus Christ was the salvation of mankind.

In the cult of Isis the notion of salvation was specifically applied to the current life as salvation from vice and passion. Book 11 of *The Golden Ass*, by Apuleius Madauros,<sup>3</sup> clearly depicts how the goddess Isis saves man from his animal passions.

Lucius, the main character in the story, having through false notions and desires completely become an animal, is saved from this state by the grace of the goddess. In his quest to regain his real self, or symbolically his purity, Lucius makes his way to a quiet beach late one night in complete despair. He invokes blessings under the full moon and in his sleep he is approached by a vision of the beautiful goddess who reveals herself as Isis and assures him of salvation. In the morning, Lucius approaches a ceremonial procession of her cult and when the Hierophant sees Lucius he takes him with them to their temple. Lucius regains his true form, is initiated into the mysteries of the cult, and becomes a devout servant of the goddess Isis. This is the text from which we receive the greatest knowledge of the Hellenistic cult of Isis, as the novitiate period and the initiation are described in some detail.

In *The Golden Ass*, as well as other writings, the goddess Isis was said to be able to free her followers from fate. This particular trait is important because it can be interpreted to mean that as one's natural condition is subject to arbitrary dangers and is inherently full of vice and temptation, one can transcend this condition and be saved through devout service to the goddess.

The Persian god Mithras, the Redeemer, also offered salvation to his followers. A salvation which could be achieved through inner transformation based on the strict adherence of his initiatic rites and passage through the mysteries of the seven degrees.

The more one continues to examine the terms initiation, mystery and salvation the more interrelated they appear. Within the Graeco-Roman context, one had to be initiated into the mysteries of life and death in order to attain salvation. It should be noted, however, that initiation into the mysteries was not simply a means of attaining intellectual knowledge, or "learning" (*mathein*). Aristotle wrote that it was actually the "experience" (*pathein*), and not knowledge learned, that allowed the initiate to comprehend the secret meaning of the mysteries.

This enlightening, transformative experience has generally been termed rebirth (*renatus*) and appears to be the central theme of the most important rituals of almost all the ancient mystery schools as well as modern initiatic organizations.

At Eleusis, the teaching on rebirth was revealed through the symbolism of Kore's descent into the underworld, her ascension from it and the subsequent return of fertility.

In the cults of Osiris, Dionysus, Attis, and Adonis, the main rite is their violent death and rebirth. In Mithraism, we find representations of Mithras slaying a bull whose blood turns into grain. In Christianity, the unjust crucifixion of Christ leads to the ultimate redemption of mankind. And within Freemasonry we learn of the murder of our beloved Grand Master Hiram Abiff by three impatient craftsmen and his subsequent raising.

According to many enlightenment thinkers the three strikes to our Grand Master's body symbolize the same vices that combined together to slay Christ. Namely, the corruption of the church, the oppression of the state, and the ignorance of the mob. Whether or not the blows are indeed symbolic of the same social vices that had combined to take the earthly life of Christ is probably a matter of opinion, but what is clear is that the ruffians had not been able to "subdue their passions" and were thus driven by them to commit the terrible act. Because the Fellowcrafts allowed themselves to be governed by their passions they murdered the qualities of a Master within themselves. It is for us therefore to learn to subdue our passions so that the Master within each of us may be raised.

Masonic ritual informs us that the Master's murder leads to the loss of the Word, leaving it to be discovered in future ages. This may suggest that mankind is yet to find the key to its salvation as a whole, while at the same time revealing the path to individual enlightenment within the allegory of the legend. But however one may wish to interpret the Hiram Legend, it is clear that the death and raising of Hiram presents some kind of teaching on rebirth. It only follows then that the doctrine of rebirth is something every dedicated Mason should become familiar with.

But before proceeding to rebirth, it may first be necessary to understand what causes the death in the first place. It appears that all the violent deaths—of Osiris, of Christ, of Hiram—have something in common. They symbolize vice, ignorance and chaos inevitably slaying the pure self and thereby making rebirth necessary for salvation. These legends reveal the nature of our circumstances and enlighten us to the trials that we must overcome. Only through the death of one's imperfect self, the leaving behind of the old and acceptance of transcendent truth, can one truly be reborn into a new self, no longer tainted by the sins of one's past. In a certain sense, and depending on one's perspective or religious background, rebirth or regeneration is a process that is constantly occurring. With such an understanding, which is certainly in accord with the modern scientific notion of constant biological regeneration, it is up to the initiate to ensure that he is constantly transforming into something better than he was before.

It should be recognized that the doctrine of rebirth as a means of regaining one's purity or rediscovering one's true self has had great influence on the Christian doctrine of original sin. Christianity teaches that because of the Fall following the transgression of Adam all humanity has inherited a state of sin, with rebirth in Christ the Savior as the only way to salvation. Within Islam, on the other hand, the doctrine of original sin is rejected because Allah accepted the repentance of Adam after the Fall (Qur'ân 2:36-37) and thereby showed that each man is responsible only for his own actions, though still subject to temptation and folly. While it seems unclear which understanding is closer to

what was taught in the various mystery schools of the ancient world, it does seem clear that regardless of the tradition one looks at, most would agree that man is constantly subject to temptation and almost always gives in sooner or later.

A good source for Freemasons to examine in the quest to overcome vice and temptation and understand rebirth is cited in the Cooke manuscript of the Old Charges to operative Masons in England (1450)<sup>4</sup>. This manuscript regards Hermes Trismegistus as the principal patron of the Craft. Some writers have even speculated that the name Hiram Abiff actually comes from Hermes Ibis. While this seems unlikely, this connection may have merit only if Hiram is considered to be a symbol of the knowledge professed by Hermes that has become lost for most of humanity due to the vices of men.

The main body of surviving Hermetic Wisdom is called the *Corpus Hermeticum* and incidentally, book 13 of the *Corpus* is entitled *On Rebirth*. The text is in the form of a dialogue between Hermes Trismegistus and his son Tat. Tat begins by asking his father to reveal the teaching on rebirth, by saying that he is now “ready to become a stranger to the world,” as this was the condition that Hermes had previously set forth. Hermes then explains that all things come from God and are one with God and it is His will only that determines who shall achieve rebirth. The dialogue continues with Hermes teaching Tat that it is only through mastery of self and transcending of the senses that the divine intellect, or *Nous*, can be discovered.

Eventually, Hermes gives an account of the way in which the transformation of rebirth is to be attained by laying out clearly the inherent vices of man and the illusions of the material world that must be conquered and replaced with the qualities of a virtuous life. The following excerpt from *Corpus Hermeticum XIII: On Rebirth* is taken from the Everard translation (1650)<sup>5</sup>:

**Tat.** Now, O Father, thou hast put me to silence for ever and all my former thoughts have quite left and forsaken me, for I see the greatness, and shape of all things here below, and nothing but falsehood in them all. And since this mortal Form is daily changed, and turned by this time into increase, and diminution, as being falsehood; what therefore is true, O Trismegistus?

**Hermes.** That, O Son, which is not troubled, nor bounded; not coloured, not figured, not changed; that which is naked, bright, comprehensible only of itself, unalterable, unbodily.

**Tat.** Now I am mad, indeed, Father; for when I thought me to have been made a wise man by thee, with these thoughts thou hast quite dulled all my senses.

**Hermes.** Yet is it so, as I say, O Son, He that looketh only upon that which is carried upward as Fire, that which is carried downward as Earth, that which is moist as Water, and that which bloweth or is subject to blast as Air; how can he sensibly understand that which is neither hard, nor moist, nor tangible, nor

perspicuous, seeing it is only understood in power and operation; but I beseech and pray to the Nous which alone can understand the Generation, which is in God.

**Tat.** Then am I, O Father, utterly unable to do it.

**Hermes.** God forbid, Son, rather draw or pull him unto thee (or study to know Him) and He will come, be but Willing, and it shall be done; quiet (or make idle) the Senses of the Body, purging thyself from unreasonable brutish torments of matter.

**Tat.** Have I any revengers or tormentors in myself, Father ?

**Hermes.** Yes, and those, not a few, but many and fearful ones.

**Tat.** I do not know them, Father.

**Hermes.** One Torment, Son, is Ignorance, a second, Sorrow, a third, Intemperance, a fourth Concupiscence, a fifth, Injustice, a sixth, Covetousness, a seventh, Deceit, an eighth, Envy, a ninth, Fraud or Guile, a tenth, Wrath, an eleventh, Rashness, a twelfth, Maliciousness.

They are in number twelve, and under these many more; some which through the prison of the body, do force the inwardly placed Man to suffer sensibly.

And they do not suddenly, or easily depart from him, that hath obtained mercy of God; and herein consists, both the manner and the reason of Rebirth.

For the rest, O Son, hold thy peace, and praise God in silence, and by that means, the mercy of God will not cease, or be wanting unto us.

Therefore rejoice, my Son, from henceforward, being purged by the powers of God, to the Knowledge of the Truth.

For the revelation of God is come to us, and when that came all Ignorance was cast out.

The knowledge of Joy is come unto us, and when that comes, Sorrow shall fly away to them that are capable of it.

I call unto Joy, the power of Temperance, a power whose Virtue is most sweet; Let us take her unto ourselves, O Son, most willingly, for how at her coming hath she put away Intemperance.

Now I call the fourth, Continnence, the power which is over Concupiscence. This, O Son, is the stable and firm foundation of Justice.

For see, how without labour, she hath chased away injustice and we are justified,  
O Son, when Injustice is away.

The sixth Virtue which comes into us, I call Communion, which is against  
Covetousness.

And when that (Covetousness) is gone, I call Truth ; and when she cometh, Error  
and Deceit vanisheth.

See, O Son, how the Good is fulfilled by the access of Truth; for by this means,  
Envy is gone from us; for Truth is accompanied with the Good, together also with  
Life and Light.

And there came no more any torment of Darkness, but being overcome, they are  
all fled away suddenly, and tumultuously.

Thou hast understood, O Son, the manner of Rebirth; for upon the coming of  
these Ten, the Intellectual Generation is perfected, and then it driveth away the  
twelve; and we have seen it in the Generation itself.

Whosoever therefore hath of Mercy obtained this Generation which is according  
to God, he leaving all bodily sense, knoweth himself to consist of divine things,  
and rejoiceth, being made by God stable and immutable.

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The *Corpus Hermeticum*, often called the cornerstone of the Western esoteric tradition, is truly one of the most significant volumes of wisdom coming from the ancient world and deserves attention in its entirety. Albert Pike wrote the following: “He who desires to attain the understanding of the Grand Word and the possession of the Great Secret, ought carefully to read the Hermetic philosophers, and will undoubtedly attain initiation, as others have done; but he must take, for the key of their allegories, the single dogma of Hermes, contained in his Table of Emerald.”<sup>6</sup>

Judging by the Dumfries No. 4 catechism<sup>7</sup>, another manuscript of the Old Charges, seventeenth-century Masons may have equated the two pillars of Solomon’s Temple with the two legendary pillars of Hermetic knowledge identified with the Emerald Tablet. One part reads:

Q. Where [was] the noble art or science found when it was lost?

A. It was found in two pillars; the one would not sink the other would not burn.

The two pillars of Hermetic knowledge, supposedly of Egyptian origin, have often been described by notable authorities throughout history as being made in such a way that one would not burn and the other would not sink. The pillars were said to be inscribed by

Thoth, who is traditionally equated with Hermes, prior to the Great Flood as a means of preserving the highest wisdom of the ancients.

It appears that the ancient conception of the terms initiation, mystery and salvation and the wisdom contained within the Hermetic tradition is of vital importance to understanding the doctrine of rebirth as it relates to Masonic initiation and ritual.

Initiation, to once again consider its Greek parent *myein*, "to close", and its Latin counterpart *initiare*, "to begin", is essentially equivalent to *renatus*, "rebirth." To be initiated is to die and to be born again—to begin a new life. It is an experience, a transformation of the self. And it is also the goal of the Masonic quest.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Greek initiatic terminology consult:

Burkert, Walter, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1987); and

Meyer, Marvin W., *The Ancient Mysteries* (HarperCollins 1987)

<sup>2</sup> For the principal works on the mysteries practiced at Eleusis in ancient Greece consult:

Mylonas, G.E., *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1961); and

Kerenyi, Carl, *Eleusis* (New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1991)

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, Marvin W., *The Ancient Mysteries* (HarperCollins 1987) p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Cooke MS dated to approximately mid-fifteenth-century. Under custodianship of British Museum.

<sup>5</sup> A newer and more comprehensive translation can be found in:

Salaman, van Oyen, Wharton and Mahé, *The Way of Hermes: New Translations of the Corpus Hermeticum and The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* (Inner Traditions 2000)

<sup>6</sup> Pike, Albert, *Morals and Dogma* (Supreme Council SJ, 1871) p. 777.

<sup>7</sup> MS from Dumfries Kilwinning Lodge No. 53 (early 1700s?). Hermetic connection discussed in: Stevenson, David, *The Origins of Freemasonry* (Cambridge Univ. Press 1988) p. 146.