

The ancient penalties: truth veiled, but not in allegory

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1. Introductory

Freemasonry's mission is to unite mankind . . . We seem to have succeeded beyond our fondest dreams, but not as we had intended. We have united the world in horror, disgust and other ways, mainly centred around our Ancient Penalties.

From fundamentalist Christians, to whom we are cultic Satanists, to the Liberal anti-cruelty lobby to whom we are sadistic and anachronistic, and the Feminists who point to our regalia and "blood oaths" as evidence that we are eight year-olds in men's bodies, we are held in deep suspicion and felt to have no place in a 21st Century free world.

Things about this amaze and amuse me:

- Freedom House shows that this year is the 7th consecutive year in which world-wide freedom declined¹. Our world is nowhere near as enlightened as we would like to believe.
- Freemasonry tends only to exist in countries where human rights are respected. We Freemasons had a hand in creating the values and freedoms we are accused of violating.
- The liberals who excoriate the fundamentalists for taking Scripture too literally, are themselves guilty of choosing to take our penalties literally – and thus just as ridiculous as they say the Fundies are...
- People who have never attended so much as an open evening claim to know much more about us than we do ourselves.

2. In pursuit of clarity:

The central issue in this controversy is that we have a secret sign for each Degree, which mimes the "penalty suffered by our ancient Brethren on the violation of their Obligation." You can't have the salute without the words and vice versa.

This ancient penalty used to be a part of the Obligation administered on the VSL: ". . . To all these points I swear Fidelity, without evasion, equivocation or mental reservation of any kind, under no less a penalty on the violation thereof of having my . . ."

This penalty, inserted into the Obligation, is incongruent with it, which intended to be understood as a binding quasi-legal contract as to its language and format. In fact, its violent language is inconsistent with everything in Freemasonry. It has a place in Freemasonry, but where its allegorical import cannot be overlooked or mistaken.

Both before and after the Obligation, we assure Candidates of the true values of Freemasonry (Something completely ignored or unknown to our critics. Before the Obligation we assure the Candidate that the solemn Obligation contains nothing contradictory to his moral civil and religious duties. After the Obligation, we point out the moral import of the "Three Greater, though symbolic Lights in Freemasonry", culminating in the words . . . "to keep us within due bounds with all mankind, more particularly our Brn. in Freemasonry."

3. The course of events

In 1982, the Grand Lodge of Scotland sent out a circular requesting daughter lodges to remove the ancient penalties from the Obligations – or at least to soften the language somewhatⁱⁱ. This followed a recommendation in 1966 that Lodges remove the ancient penalty from the Obligation.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1986, UGLE excised the ancient penalties from the Obligations. Many other GL's followed suit, but the change was not universal.

Let's face it, it will be almost impossible to deny that we wimped out in the face of widespread condemnation of our Order. In spite of having a Tyler to keep off all Cowans and Eavesdroppers, we have let them in – in our heads. We have fallen foul of my Granny's curse: "What will the neighbours think?!"

If, however, we are to be fair, whatever the cause of the ban on repeating the ancient penalties in the Obligation, the result appears to be beneficial. The Obligation is structured as a legally binding agreement – between TGAOTU and the Candidate. The literal nature of the language preceding the penalty invites the Candidate to take the penalty literally too. Legal is now separated from allegorical.

The possibility of misunderstanding the intention and significance of the Ancient Penalties is now somewhat lessened. Unfortunately, the anti-Masonic brigade still hasn't caught on to that fact.

As a result, there are a number of lies, misunderstandings and myths which cloud the issue. They need to be cleared up before we can move on to the true meanings of our signs, and thus derive edification from them.

4. Myths and misconceptions:

a. "Blood Oaths"

This is no longer **apparently** valid, as the Obligation no longer contains the controversial passage. It contains, still, the much more serious statement: ". . . on the violation thereof, of being considered a wilfully perjured individual . . .". Perjury doesn't seem to be considered a very serious offence in today's South Africa – but in more civilized countries, it is a very serious crime: that of deliberately misrepresenting the truth to the Court, whilst under oath.

Any local accusation, thus, along these lines is therefore a silly attempt to parrot what is found on the Internet.

b. They are a feature of their era, like the oaths on being admitted to the Bar.

Aldridge^{iv} joins various others in claiming that the ancient penalties, though symbolic, are of a piece with the era in which they originated: "*These or very similar variations of them were in use in England among the oaths taken by mariners during the 15th century and were also used in oaths assumed by those being admitted to the bar in London, England during the 16th century.*"

I tried to verify Bro. Aldridge's statement. I found two sources which confirmed his statement that there was, indeed an oath taken by candidates for admission to the Bar^v. Unfortunately, however, his statement appears to be misleading in other respects. "The form of the oath was settled by the late 1400's but was likely of origin in the Century before. 'Ye shall swear that well and truly ye shall serve the king's people as one of the serjeants at the law. And ye shall truly counsel them that ye shall be retained with, after your cunning. And ye shall not defer, tract or delay their causes willingly for covetise of money or other thing that may turn you to profit. And ye shall give attendance accordingly. As God your help, and his saints.'"

No sign of torture or other penalty there.

Another source compared the 1st Degree penalty with that of mutiny in the Royal Navy^{vi} – hanging from the yardarm, yes, but cutting out the tongue? The only death penalty which bears some passing resemblance to our ancient penalties is an aspect of the penalty for treason – hanging, drawing and quartering.

I think my learned Brn have been overreaching a bit. In fact, their sweeping statements discredit Masonic research, and bring ridicule upon the Craft. In short, our Ancient Penalties in no way resemble any form of capital punishment in use in Britain or its domains during Freemasonry's formative years.

c. Symbolic? Of what??

This is the entire crux of the matter: if our penalties are symbolic, of what are they symbolic? The usual answer suggests that they are symbolic and intended to scare the Candidate into understanding the seriousness of their Masonic Obligation.

That still begs the question as to what is being symbolised, and adds another: why do we need to scare the Candidate?

Unless we answer the question that so many Masonic authors have begged, we sound like so many old codgers wringing our hands and mouthing silly old saws and platitudes.

Even Mackey ducks the question^{vii}.

d. The assumption that swearing oaths is proof of cultic satanic and the sinful.

There is a logical progression here, based on entirely false premises. The first assumption is that oaths are forbidden by Scripture. They then link the bloody bits to that prohibition, and draw the conclusion that Freemasonry, if not actually Satanic, is dangerously anti-Christian.

Poor exegesis is the source of much error. The prohibition is rather upon what you swear on^{viii}. Our Obligation is on the VSL, and concludes with a prayer.

There is no blood involved, and there is therefore no blasphemy. As there is no blasphemy, there is nothing to undermine any Faith.

e. The assumption that our penalties have ever been carried out.

It is a simple fact that there is no proof, forensic or archaeological, that any of our ancient penalties have ever been carried out.

[Tongue in cheek, here] The most recent opportunity came recently when severe weather caused the sand to be washed away from a well-known Charismatic Pastor's beach house. He directed his workers to carry sand across from a nearby home, owned by the widow of a Freemason. After some excavation, during which no severed tongues or cadavers were uncovered, the workmen were treated to an imperious stare by the formidable Bridget, and desisted.

More seriously, there was the infamous Morgan affair^{ix}.

In 1826, a man in Massachusetts USA wrote yet another exposé of Freemasonry – because he didn't get his way with the local Lodge (of which he was a member). In this, he was aided and abetted by a local newspaper publisher who had been blackballed by that Lodge. Local Masons chose to buy Morgan off and invite him to pursue his career in Canada. He took the money and ran. He was never seen again. It is believed he lived out his life in Smyrna, Turkey.

Later, the body of an unknown man was later washed up in a river on the Canadian border. Immediately, the cry went up that Morgan had been murdered according to the Masonic ancient penalties:

- The man died by drowning – nothing Masonic in that.
- His tongue was still in its accustomed place.
- He has never been buried in any sands, rough or not,
- He wasn't Morgan.

But, with John Quincy Adams building his political career on the back of anti-Masonic hysteria, the public heard what it wanted to. Masonic “justice” occurred when the GL shut down the Lodge as punishment. You can commit any crime you like, as long as the Chains aren't caused embarrassment . . .

The same general principles applied to Jack the Ripper's victims, believed to have been murdered by Masonic means.

f. The assumption that our ancient penalties are, in fact, ancient.

We are led to assume, by the wording of our rituals, that the penalties have always been part and parcel of ancient Freemasonry. Most debatable.

There is nothing in the Constitutions of the Craft, as set forth in the Regius and Cooke Mss. But then, one would not expect to see them there, as the rituals of Freemasonry are not covered by those documents.

So we have to apply the adage that absence of proof is not proof of absence.

The first time they are mentioned in print is in 1696.^x In the first part, a catechism, these words are found: “The first is to heill and conceal, send, under no less pain, which is then cutting of your throat, for which you most make that sign, when you say that.”

At most, we can say that words were probable learned orally, by rote before they were committed to writing, and that if they appear in a catechism, they might have been in an Obligation, now lost . . .

The first time that the ancient penalties are mentioned in the actual wording of the Obligation is in 1727^{xi}. The Manuscript, although purporting to be dated 1727, was first published in 1751. It takes the form of a confession – a very popular literary convention in those days, with the Amorous adventures of Moll Flanders leading the way.

"As I shall answer before God at the great day, and this Company, I shall heal and conceal, or not divulge and make known the secrets of the Mason-word, (Here one is taken bound, not to write them on paper, parchment, timber, stone, sand, snow, &c.) **under the pain of having my tongue taken out from beneath my chowks, and my heart out from beneath my left oxter, and my body buried within the sea-mark, where it ebbs and flows twice in the twenty four hours.**"

It seems so neat and cut and dried that however much I want to believe its authenticity, I have a nagging suspicion.

I must be getting old.

At any rate, the ancient penalties are not, in fact, **demonstrably** ancient.

We should now move on to a more defensible analysis of the correct purpose of these penalties.

5. The Ancient Penalties – Truth veiled in allegory.

The Ancient Penalties do not describe what others will do to us; they indicate the damage that we do to ourselves if we violate our self-imposed Obligations.

Using a physical image to drive home a spiritual Truth is not unique to the Ancient Penalties. We are given a clear guide as to how to interpret those penalties right at the beginning of the Initiation Ceremony. Among the first words spoken to a Candidate are these: “As this is a . . . to your flesh, so may the recollection of it prove a torture to you conscience . . .”. The physical is thus a symbol of the spiritual.

Taken collectively, the penalties refer to the excision of certain parts of the body, and their disposal by various methods. These body parts are, in addition to the throat and tongue, the hand, liver and heart.

If we use the symbolism of the past, much of it still in our collective conscience today, we find that violation of our Obligations causes us to destroy our credibility in thought, word, sirit and deed.

a. The throat& tongue

My first reference is from the Book of Proverbs, attributed to King Solomon: Chapter 3, verse 3 says: “Let fidelity and steadfastness never leave you, bind them at your **throat**.”

Proverbs 8³⁵ “Whoever finds me [wisdom], finds life and obtains favour from God; but those who miss me injure their *nephesh*. All who hate me love death.”

The Hebrew word *Nephesh* is translated in this passage as throat, but actually carries the meaning of soul – “life principle”^{xii}. (We can speculate in other forums as to why the King James version translates *nephesh* as throat). The tongue and throat are the organs through which we take in life-giving breath and give out thoughts and words (hopefully life-affirming). The essence of our *nepheshis* thus always linked to a sense of community; of relationships with other people.

The Beatitudes (quoting the Mishneh and Tanakh), regard damaging another man’s reputation as the equivalent of murder^{xiii} – hence the idea of character assassination.

(Just as an aside, the beehive (a Masonic symbol) is often found in pictures of St John Chrysostomus (Golden Mouth) – his preaching was so eloquent that it earned him his nickname).

Additional confirmation of this understanding (though not well-known in the formative period of Freemasonry can be found in other traditions: in the Oriental tradition, the Throat (blue) Chakra’s health depends on how openly and honestly a person expresses him/herself. Falsehoods and dishonourable speech pollute the energy of the throat, and even cause various diseases there. “Your biography becomes your biology” – Caroline Myss^{xiv} .

b. Disposal of the tongue and body

The burial of the remains “in the rough sands . . .” caused me a problem for a long time (I thought it refers to a cable tow’s length **above** high tide). It refers to that no man’s land between high and low tides. There is an idea there of neither nor.

In the imagery of the Exodus, it would indicate anyone who followed Moses . . . up to a point. The Candidate becomes a Mason, but fails the most critical test of good faith as it appears before him. (In fact, the water crossing test occurs twice in the Exodus story. Two entire Tribes failed the second one.)

Go back on your given word, and you are neither a Mason, nor a cowan. You have no place in any society.

c. Hand

Clearly the Hand refers to our deeds. A Similar break in credibility occurs when a Bro. proves himself untrue . . .

d. Heart

According to the Ancient Greeks, and taught by Galen^{xv}, we find that the heart is the seat of the *pneumazotikon*^{xvi}, the life spirit. It was considered to control blood flow within the arteries (veins belonged to the liver). It was our intellectual, spiritual and moral core. Aristotle said it was the seat of thought, reason and emotion.

Biblically, there is a very interesting symbolism regarding the heart – that of a book (whether a stone tablet, a tightly wrapped scroll, or a book as we know it). It derives from the idea that thoughts and memories were hidden within the heart. The earliest reference is in Jeremiah who promises that God would *write* His laws upon our hearts^{xvii}. Apparently, the word “record” derives from the Latin word “cor”, meaning heart. From early medieval times to the computer age, that book not only had a spiritual but a romantic aspect.

I refer you to the closing ceremony of a Masons’ Lodge . . .

In the Eastern Tradition, the most important Chakra, because it unites all the others, is the Green Chakra of the Heart. It governs Love in its highest forms, and all emotions relating to Love, including grief, pain and fear of rejection.

Thus, by betraying your sacred trust, you destroy the basis of every healthy relationship. You might as well just throw your soul to the crows . . .

e. The liver

The oldest catechism^{xviii} asks: *Where shall I find the key of your lodge? Answer: Three foot and an half from the lodge door under an perpend esler, and a green divot. But under the lap of my liver where all my secrets of my heart lie.*

The idea that the liver is a place where secrets can be hidden is derived from Claudius Galen via Hermeticism. Galen was the great medical authority even after William Harvey published his work in 1646. Galen’s ideas on physiology acquired a spiritual context from Hermeticism, the philosophy which drove the spirit of the Renaissance.

According to Galen, the liver was the vital organ which was the seat of the *pneumaphysikon*, the natural spirit, and governed nutrition and metabolism. In his view, it was the seat of the passions.

Those who managed to plough through the later books of the Pentateuch will recall that for many sacrifices, God only required that the liver, kidneys and all the fat attached to them were to be sacrificed to Him, and that the priests could keep the rest of the animal. The basic idea was that the liver was the source of life force and vitality.

In another tradition, from the Eastern world, the area in which we find the liver is governed by the 3rd, or Yellow Chakra. In this system, the 3rd Chakra defines our sense of self – our Ego. It governs our self esteem and is the source of our personal creativity, drive and power. It's whence people derive their success in business, politics and the arts.

A local Hindu priest, YuvenPillay once told me that this Chakra governs the impulse which manifests itself as: "What will the neighbours think?"

Masonic significance: Taking all of this together, we will notice themes which are to be found in our rituals from the very beginning of our Masonic careers: in particular, the management of the Ego. We are not to destroy our egos, but to keep them under control by the force of conscience.

Violation of our Obligation, therefore, shows that we have **not** learned to govern our passions or to rein in the selfish tendencies of the Ego. We just haven't become true Freemasons – yet. If a Mason were to violate his Obligation, he would have so polluted himself that it would indeed have been better that no trace or memory of his existence should have soiled our Lodges.

Thus, if we look at the context of the penalty, we will see that a man who violates his Obligation actually performs the penalty upon himself.

Freemasonry is, however, progressive. There will be many occasions upon which we give way to emotional displays, or cloak selfishness in an outward display of Masonic virtue. But we must "persevere in the practice of **every** virtue." One day at a time.

6. Conclusion

A Mason who betrays his Trust has made himself untrustworthy in thought, word, mind and deed. No-one can be held accountable for that but the Mason himself.

We do a great deal of spiritual and social damage when we betray our Trust. Freemasonry seeks to enlighten us as to that fact. It makes a great deal over something ultimately very trivial – keeping the confidence placed in us in the imparting of certain signs, grips and tokens.

In that, we hear the echo of Scripture – as you have been faithful in little, you will be faithful in much.

Those disturbing penalties occur nowhere in Western criminal justice; nor do they reflect the brutality of the era in which heretics were put to the question and ultimately put to death. They do not reflect some diseased and sadistic mindset. They are simply an extended metaphor or symbol of what must inevitably happen within, when you give yourself over to wilful deceit and perjury.

In any society, but particularly in our Judaeo-Christian tradition, the lessons of our Ancient Penalties are immensely valuable to all men and women – they are not a stick which we have made for our own backs; they are the foundation of all honourable behaviour and thus of a decent, harmonious and peaceful society.

ⁱ<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>

ⁱⁱInformation courtesy of Bro. John A. Grant PSDGM. The Scottish GL has stated that it does not consider that it has the right to dictate ritual to its daughter lodges.

ⁱⁱⁱ[http://www.tntpc.com/252/philalethes/p92apr.html#OUR MASONIC PENALTIES](http://www.tntpc.com/252/philalethes/p92apr.html#OUR_MASONIC_PENALTIES).

^{iv}<http://www.masonicworld.com/education/articles/ANCIENT-SYMBOLIC-PENALTIES.htm>

^vwww.mlb.ca/site/bookch1.htm gives the oath as taken from about 1400. See

<http://www.barcouncilofindia.org/about/about-the-legal-profession/history-of-the-legal-profession/> for the 1729 revision.

^{vi}<http://www.yorkrite.com/ia/lodge2/10.html>

^{vii}<http://www.masonicdictionary.com/penalty.html>. This gives an excerpt from Mackey's Encyclopedia.

^{viii} Matthew 5³³⁻³⁷

^{ix}<http://www.kinghiramsloodge.org/morgan.html>

^x Edinburgh Register House Ms [www.rgle.org.uk/Edinburgh Register House 1696.pdf](http://www.rgle.org.uk/Edinburgh_Register_House_1696.pdf)

^{xi}http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/Manuscripts/manuscripts/the_dundee_manuscript_1727.htm

^{xii} See Body symbolism in the Bible, by Silvia Schroer et al.

^{xiii} Matthew 5^{22ff}.

^{xiv} Passim in "Anatomy of the Spirit".

^{xv}<http://www.stanford.edu/class/history13/earlysciencelab/body/heartpages/heart.html>

^{xvi} "In the human organism the fire and air make up what the ancient Greeks called the vital force (pneumazotikon). Due to the innate heat of the fire element stored in the heart, the outer air is drawn deeply into the lungs to cool the body. These complimentary opposites produce the energy cycle of the vital force that is circulated through the arteries (fire) and the nervous system (air). The water and earth element make up the natural force (pneumaphysikon) which rules from its seat in the liver, the transformation of food (earth) and drink (water)." http://www.simillimum.com/education/little-library/constitution-temperaments-and-miasms/hct/article04.php?action=results&poll_ident=1

^{xvii} Jer 31³³.

^{xviii} Edinburgh Register House Ms [www.rgle.org.uk/Edinburgh Register House 1696.pdf](http://www.rgle.org.uk/Edinburgh_Register_House_1696.pdf)