

A Sprig of Acacia By Richard D. Carver

Masonic tradition and ceremony tells that certain conspirators murdered Hiram Abiff, and then marked his grave with a sprig of Acacia. The relevance of this curious practice is never really explained in the Masonic work, and its significance is usually completely dismissed as the story progresses further.

The legend says that one member of the search party discovered a sprig of Acacia, and was surprised when it easily gave way. This event caused the others present to pause and give this event further consideration. One might be quick to assume their curiosity was aroused because the plant had given way so easily, but it is important to remember that the story says that *a sprig of Acacia* was found. By definition, this would indicate a small branch or cutting, and not a complete tree. Since a sprig would have no root structure, this would further explain how it came to easily give way. It is my assertion; however, that the act of the sprig easily giving way is of much less significance than that the sprig was a branch *of Acacia*.

A Google search for the word “Acacia” yields over 1.7 million references, yet few Masons know of its history or of its uses. Acacia is not only a botanical species, it is the name of a major fraternity, thousands of business consortiums, and is used as a homorganic remedy that claims to cure acne, boils, ear infections, acid reflux, hemorrhoids and to add inches to the male member. Ironically, there is even a series of anti-Masonic books published under the name Acacia Press.

Acacia is a member of the myrtle and ivy genus of plants, most commonly known as Gum Arabic, Mimosa, Honey Locust, and Thornberry. It is comprised of around 1200 sub-species, a majority of which are found in the various tropical and subtropical regions. In Freemasonry, Acacia is often incorrectly represented as an Evergreen, however it is actually a deciduous plant — completely shedding its leaves annually and remaining bare during a dormant regeneration period.

True Acacia is a long-thorned plant, and given its abundant presence in the Middle East as a thorny shrub, it is widely speculated that it was used to make the Crown of Thorns. About 950 varieties are found only in Australia where they are locally known as Wattles or Kangaroo Thorns. The next largest accumulation is in Africa, where the flat canopy of the Umbrella Thorn Acacia makes it one of the most recognizable trees of the African savanna.

A bushier and less tree-like version of Acacia grows in sand dunes and the rocky grounds of grasslands. It is found in areas with annual rainfall as low as 12". It can survive in 125° F temperatures during the day, and freezing temperatures at night, however these species are smaller and are not of the variety large enough to produce lumber. It can be found in upper Egypt and the Sudan, in Kordofan, Dafur and Arabia, and is exported from Alexandria, which is considered to be the best of its kind and used to make certain pharmaceuticals and remedies.

Despite having thrived in many of the regions of the world, no species of Acacia hearty enough to produce lumber can be found indigenous to the area around the Sinai where the Temple is believed to have been built. This does not, however, discount the notion that a sprig of Acacia was used to mark the grave of Hiram Abiff.

Acacia is mentioned specifically in connection with the building of the Tabernacle in Exodus Chapters 37 and 38. Acacia wood was used to construct the Ark of the Covenant and its poles, the table of showbread and its poles, the brazen altar and its poles, the incense altar and its poles, and all the poles for the hanging of the curtains as well as the supports. In short, all the structural load-bearing features of the Tabernacle were constructed of Acacia wood. It should be further noted that one of the freewill offerings that the children of Israel brought to the Tabernacle was Acacia wood, as recorded in Exodus 35:24.

Every one who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and every man with whom was found acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it.

This verse demonstrates that the Hebrews held Acacia in extremely high regard and used it for the most special of circumstances.

Until stopping to build the temple, the Hebrews had been a nomadic and transient people since the time of their exodus from Egypt, and it is unlikely they had ever remained in any one place long enough for transplanted trees to mature to the point where they could

produce lumber. This, when coupled with there being no suitable indigenous Acacia trees in the region, would indicate that the wood used in construction of the Temple was either sent for, or that it had been brought along as they traveled those many years. In either instance, the dense and heavy Acacia wood was unquestionably a burden to transport and further proves it was considered to be of considerable value and importance.

It is very likely that any scraps of Acacia wood that were not used in the actual construction of the Temple were quickly snatched up and retained by the Hebrews as artifacts, much like someone today might keep a brick from the fallen Berlin wall as a souvenir of a significant event. Surely a scrap of wood from the actual tree used to make the Ark of the Covenant would become a valued possession, as would a sprig from that tree. It is reasonable to speculate that such keepsakes would likely pass from generation to generation as sacred icons.

Brother Albert G. Mackey, in his book *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, mentions the significance of Acacia, and he devoted the entirety Chapter 26 to its examination. Unfortunately, much of his text is devoted to a diatribe on its proper pronunciation as “acacia” versus referring to it as the slang “cassia,” and the time before this reader experiences complete eye-glaze-over becomes fairly short. He does mention that the ancient Hebrews considered Acacia wood to be sacred, and it is known that they regularly used it to mark the head of a grave as a sign of their belief in the immortality of the soul. He also noted that mourners at funerals carried in their hands the sprig of an evergreen — and he specifically names cedar and cypress being used — which they would deposit at

the grave. This statement is technically incorrect, in that while cedar is an evergreen, cypress, like Acacia, is a deciduous seasonal tree and are not members of the evergreen family. This generalization follows the misconceived notion most Masons share in the belief that Acacia is an evergreen.

Mackey and several others point out that the use of Acacia to mark grave sites may have been at least partially circumstantial in addition to having been a sign of reverence.

Agreeably to Hebrew law, no bodies were allowed to be interred within the walls of a city; and as the Choens, or priests, were prohibited from crossing over the site of a grave, it became necessary to mark their locations so they could be avoided.

Multiple references can be found documenting this practice and sighting the same reasoning. One can further speculate that in order to mark a grave, it would likely be done with some object not common or ordinary, in order to make the site very obvious. This furthers the assertion that Acacia was not commonly found in the region, and did not grow abundantly in the fields.

Bearing this in mind, we can further presume that the villains in the Hiram Abiff story were likely themselves Hebrews. If not, as builders long working in the region, they had most certainly become familiar with Hebrew customs and beliefs. Since they would have been of the same generation as the builders of the Ark of the Covenant, or the one that immediately followed, it is also possible that one or more of them possessed a sprig of Acacia made souvenir during the construction of the Ark or of the Temple.

In the course of the story, it becomes apparent that several of the ruffians came to regret their deeds. During the hurried burial of Hiram Abiff, one amongst them marked the site of the grave with a sprig of Acacia, should it ever be necessary to find the place again.

The significance of this deed can be interpreted two-fold. First, the site was marked with a wood considered sacred and held as a symbol of immortality. One might further speculate that the particular sprig of Acacia might have been an actual souvenir from the building of one of the Temple. In either case, it would indicate the importance and esteem afforded Hiram Abiff; a man so highly regarded, that even his murderers paid him high tribute by marking his grave with so valuable a possession.

The second interpretation remains more cryptic, and is not specially defined in the story. They marked the site of the grave as though they expected they might need to return at some future date. If not as a sign of great respect, why would they mark the location of a grave they needed to hide?

Due to its sacred nature and its rarity in the region, it is clear that their choice to mark the grave with Acacia proved to be their demise. It would stand out like finding an oak branch on the surface of the moon, and thus finding Acacia in an area where it did not naturally occur was a certain clue that a grave had been marked on that site!

The story of Hiram Abiff is not literal, nor can it be proven by science. This report is not intended to be absolute—or even to be taken as fact. It is presented for your consideration with the reminder that even the smallest word or step in Masonic lore has an actual meaning, and often a hidden one. Nothing appears without reason. This is an attempt to offer a possible explanation as to why Acacia is mentioned in one such story.