

# The Sprig of Acacia

By Richard D. Carver

Masonic tradition and ceremony tells us that certain conspirators murdered Hiram Abiff, that they came to mark his grave with a sprig of Acacia. The relevance of this curious practice is never really explained in traditional Masonic work, and its significance is usually completely dismissed as the story progresses to the next stage.

This legend says that a member of the search party later discovered the 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. Although not specified, this would indicate a small branch or a cutting from a tree, but 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 it giving way is far 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, the reference to “the evergreen placed in the coffin” often is eluded to mean Acacia. This association is technically erroneous, as Acacia is actually not a member of the evergreen family, but instead, a deciduous plant — one that completely sheds its leaves annually and remains bare during a dormant regeneration period.

True Acacia is a long-thorned plant, and given its abundance in the Middle East as a thorny shrub, it is widely speculated that it was used to make the infamous 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 the regions of 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, there is no species of Acacia hearty enough to produce lumber that can be found indigenous to the area around the Sinai where the Temple is believed to have been built.

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 in 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.

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 rather lengthy 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 know that they regularly used it to mark the head 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 again, technically erroneous, in that while cedar is an evergreen, cypress, like Acacia, is a deciduous seasonal tree and not a member of the evergreen family.

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. To set foot upon a

grave made that person unclean for a day and it was considered a sin of some significance.

Multiple references can be found documenting this practice and sighting the same reasoning. One might further speculate that in order to mark a grave, it would likely be done with an object that was not common or ordinary, in order to make certain that the site quite 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 would have most certainly become familiar with Hebrew customs and beliefs.

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 several ways. First, the site was marked with a wood considered sacred and held as a symbol of immortality. Apparently, his murders intended to mark the site.

The second interpretation remains a bit 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 to it at some future date. If not as a sign of great respect for the man, Hiram Abiff, why would they mark the location of a grave they surely wanted and needed to hide?

Due to its sacred nature and its overall rarity to the region, it is clear that their choice to mark the grave with Acacia proved to be the demise of these three. It came to 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 body was buried there!

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 researched fact. It is presented for your consideration with the reminder that even the smallest word or step in Masonic work has an actual meaning, and often a hidden one. Nothing appears without reason. It is often said that Hiram Abiff was a man of impeccable character and was held with the highest regard. This must be so; for even those who conspired and killed him would not leave him to rest until his grave was marked with a sprig of Acacia!