



Three Pillars

Many of our brethren on the continent of Europe may be puzzled even by the title: *three* columns or pillars? Certainly *two*, as pillars, is pretty much universally understood in Freemasonry, but three is something that is more peculiar - but not exclusive - to Freemasonic forms as developed especially in the Anglophonic world.

For those of us in that world, the inverse may very well be the case, with a sense of perplexity that a fellow Freemason seems befuzzled at the mention of the three pillars.

So firstly, let's make a clear distinction between the *two* pillars and the three: they are not related in the minds of many, and in various descriptions found in both ritual and documents. Having said this, there are of course many ways they can be found to be closely tied by both historical development and, perhaps more importantly for exegesis, by the active thinking imagination. I shall present one such perspective in this paper.

For the sake of those brethren who are not familiar with the three pillars, they are found *within* the Temple or Lodge room (I shall henceforth use the latter term by personal preference). In contradistinction, the *two* pillars are those that the Torah (the Pentateuch) tells us are placed at the porchway or entrance to King Solomon's Temple: they remain outside.

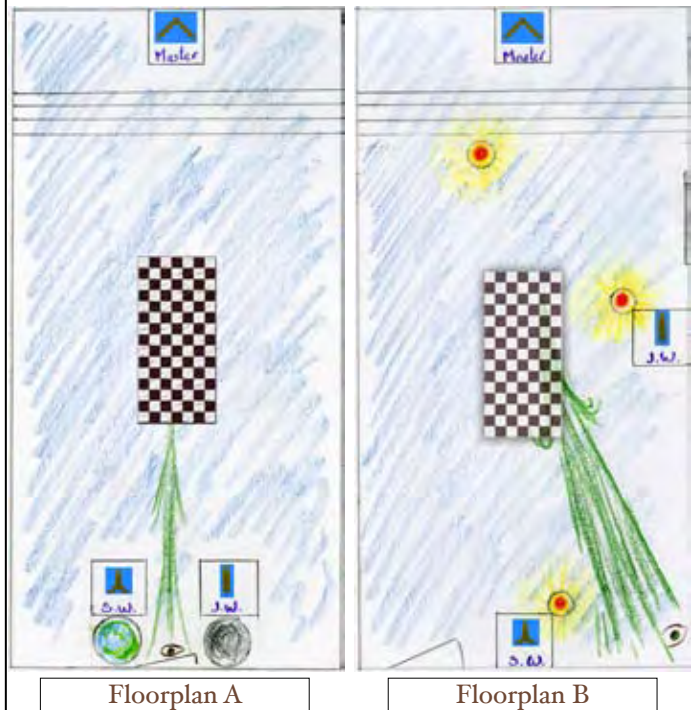
The three pillars, inside the Lodge room, also formerly provided the minimal amount of lighting required, upon which each bears a candle (or its modern equivalent: an electric bulb in too many parts of the world, inevitably losing the obvious sense that fire, or *passion*, gives rise to light). They thus provide the 'lesser lights' to the room - the *greater* lights being symbolically provided by the VSL (or sacred writing), the Square, and the Compasses. Here we already see that the *symbolic* and *internal* light is deemed of greater value than the external physical light, despite the fact that such physical light is also to be taken with its full symbolic sense of a triune of light

1 These were earlier called 'greater lights' but, in working compromise between the 'Antients' and the 'Moderns', were re-named.

over darkness.

So perhaps questions can be asked as to why one form of Freemasonry has these three, the another form does not. The answer appears to lie in historical developments of the various Lodge room arrangement and layout². Below are typical general floor plans. I say 'typical' even though it should be pointed out that variations occurs on the basic same theme. In fact, chances are that the reader's own Lodge will differ somewhat from either of these. A third relatively common floorplan are for either the two or three pillars to be placed adjacent the tessellated pavement (when this does not occupy the *whole* floorspace). Forget the green arrows in the floorplan diagrammes that follow for now - I'll refer to these in short enough time.

Diagramme A is more or less typical of many 'Continental' European Lodge rooms, and B more or less typical of Anglo-Saxon ones. But remember, variations and cross-usage occurs.



I'll be referring to these in the discussion that follows. In each case, it should be noted that brethren are (with some exceptions) seated in the north and south sides.

2 Cf B.E. Jones 1956, p. 355f.

Naming the pillars

On Floorplan A, it should be obvious to any brother who has been passed that the two pillars refer to Boaz [z(WB)] and Jachin [ayKy] (this latter transliterated from the Hebrew in various ways), and have further allusion to the pillars of fire and cloud that guided the Jews fleeing from their Egyptian bondage. Much more can be said of these, and reflection on [1 Kings 7](#) is encouraged.

On Floorplan B, the three pillars, presented with lit candle atop each, refer to three orders of architecture: the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian (with the Tuscan and what is called the 'composite' therefore omitted). Which column or pillar is placed adjacent the Master and the Wardens varies, though it has become commonplace to have the Ionic with the Master representing *Wisdom* (and hence easily associated with King Solomon); the Doric with the Senior Warden representing *Strength* (or *Fortitude*); and the Corinthian with the Junior Warden representing *Beauty*.

A symbolic distinction that can be gleaned between the two and three pillars, despite their otherwise possible reconciliation, is from observing the frontispiece from the *Scottish Constitution* of 1848:



Here we can not only see the three columns (as they are more generally referred to than 'pillars')

in the foreground and similarly presented to the Harris standardised first degree tracing board (to which we shall return in a minute), as well as the two pillars (on the left of the image, deeper in perspective) referring to Boaz and Jachin.

It should be noted that the image has the Corinthian on the right-hand side, the Doric in the centre (and further set from the viewer's perspective), and the Ionic to the left. This is also, in fact, an example of the variation that I mentioned a couple of paragraphs above, for hereon the Master is presented with the Doric.

Compare this to the 1st degree tracing board that has become the standard (though definitely not the sole version) used in Lodges set according to Floorplan B - the basic design painted by John Harris *circa* 1845. Comparing here not only the three pillars in their respective positions, but also the location of Sun, Moon (with and without stars, and All-Seeing Eye or, in this case, the heptagramme (which is sometimes instead a pentalpha, ie, a pentagramme).

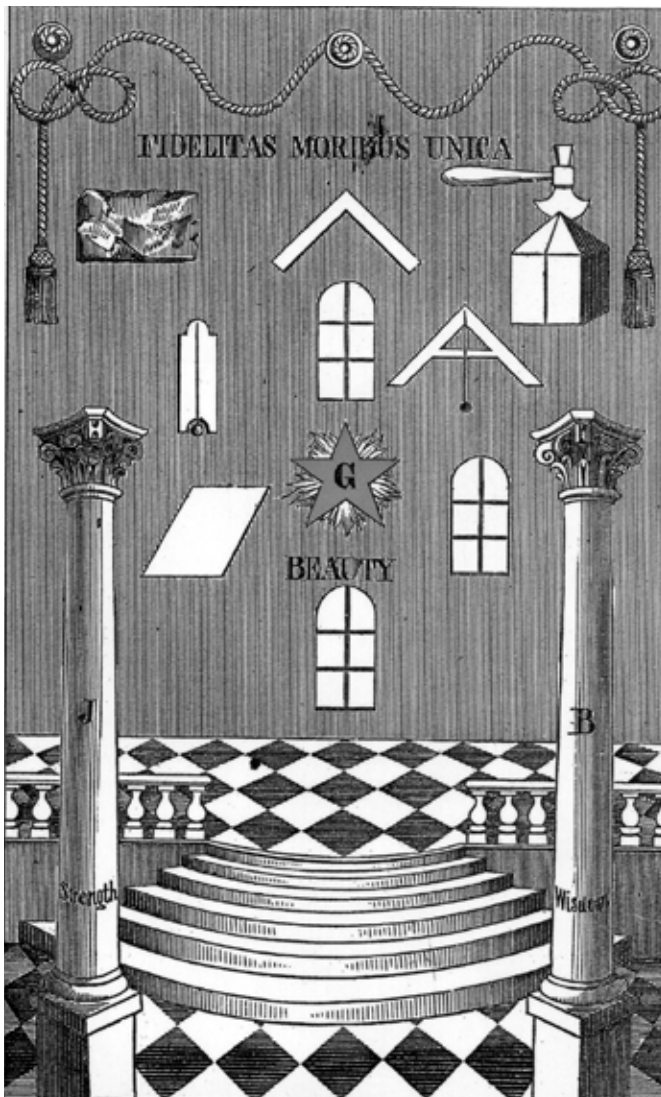
With both these images, what is also clear



is that the working tools associated with the Master and the two Wardens are clearly placed at their respective base. The perspective is therefore presented without confusion: the viewer's position is from the deep South-West, in the place I have marked Floorplan B with an eye, and the arrow the direction of view.

If nothing else, the tracing board presents to the imaginative faculty a means to enter in meditative light the Lodge room, here presented too with altar and stairway or ladder towards the spiritual realms.

The overall pattern, however, is not closely connected to an 18th C. tracing board depicting more closely our Floorplan A. Observe, however, that the *three* virtues of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are also preserved, and those with clearly Jachin and Boaz. In this case, the *Master* is allocated Beauty:



I have taken a little space to present these variations on both floor design, pillar variations, and the position of what can only be called three Masonic Virtues (on which a little more to

come) in great part to show that any discussions at times presupposes a single viewpoint, rather than the variety that actually finds expression within the Craft. If Freemasonry encourages the meeting of people with vastly different religious and political views, then we should also give due consideration to the variety that presents itself within Freemasonry Universal.

Virtues

There appears to be three sets of virtues commonly propounded within the Craft. Two sets, which are perhaps more common in writings, are, on the one hand, Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth, each having, at least according to some, a direct relation with, on the other, the second set of Fraternity, Equality, and Liberty.

Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, however, appear more frequently in one form or another in *visual* form. In other words, these allegories are illustrated with symbols, and through their further exegesis we may come to slowly unveil their multi-layered, but also precise, meanings.

Specifically as *pillars* of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, they also harken to Kabbalistic works, and it is to this we shall now turn our attention to, at first without consideration of Freemasonic concern, and only later shall we begin to take steps to posit ways to reconcile the two in harmonious ways.

Kabbalah

Kabbalistic considerations have been influential within European culture since before the 15th century. Indeed, it was in part adopted and adapted by some in an attempt to convert Jews to Christianity, using the trinitarian imagery found in some version of the Tree of Life to argue for the validity of a trinitarian theology.

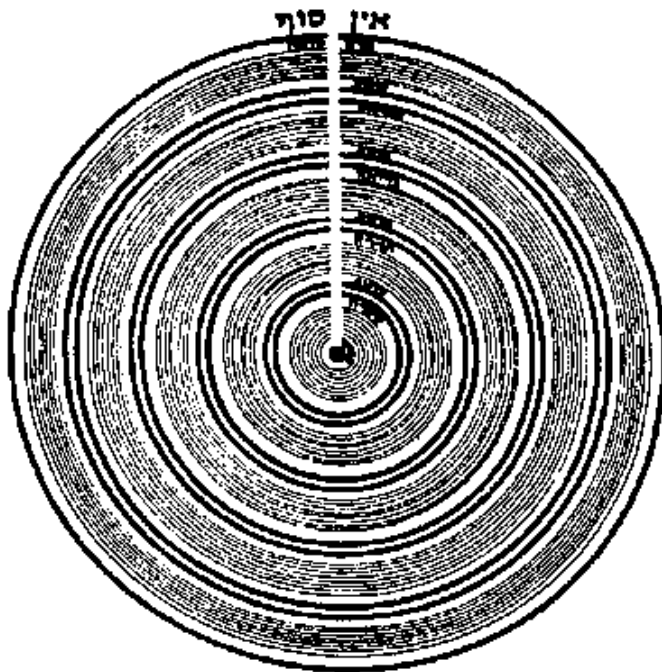
Here we are of course not concerned with this aspect, nor with the numerous forms the pattern of the Tree of Life takes (many of which non-pillar related). For the sake of liberating considerations to be more fluid rather than fixed, consider for a moment the emanations that make the Tree of Life as concentric circles, each enclosing and giving rise to ever denser manifestation *within* its own onion-like layer.

Such was a common enough rendition. What is here important as a first consideration is that there are ten successive emanation from the 'unmanifest', or, rather, to give it its Hebrew

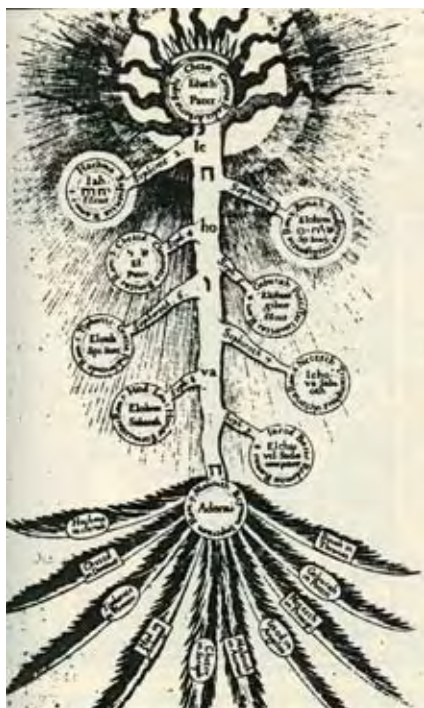
name, from the *Ein Sof* - without limit.

Whether this is equivalent to Aristotle's unmoved mover³ is something that needs much further exploration. For our purposes, let's just take it that there is some parity between the concepts.

From this *Ein Sof* emanates ten successive contractions. It is also relatively simply to here imagine how this model reflects also the ancient view of the universe, with the Kingdom of the Earth at its very centre.



These successive emanations or *Sefirot* were at times also represented as fruits at the end of a Tree having its roots embedded within the spiritual domain:

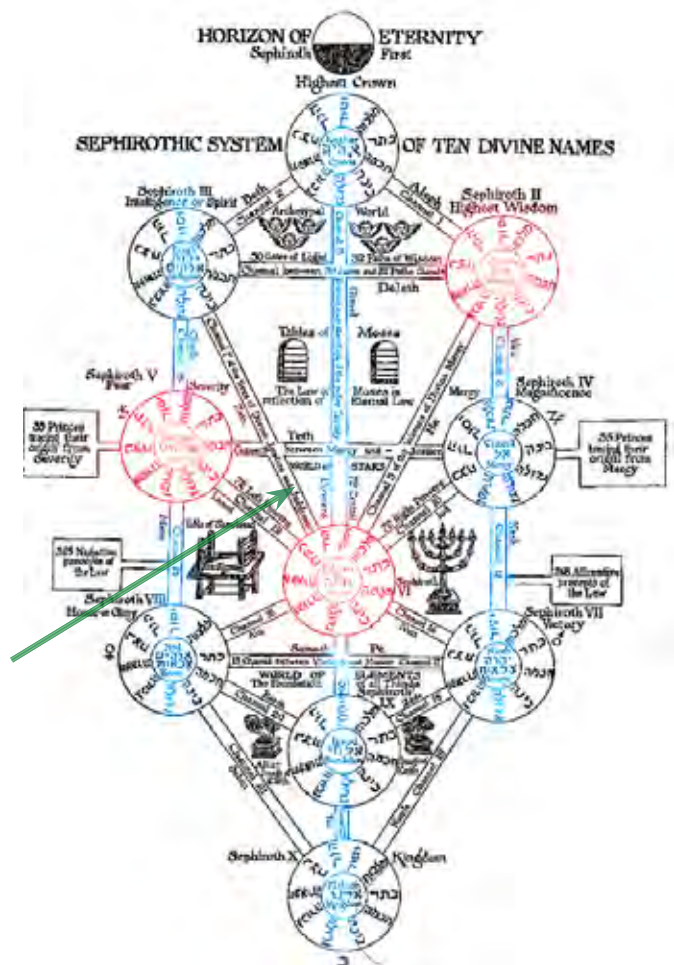


3 Cf his *Physics* 3.2

It is but by a short series of variations that we arrive at some of the most common and popular versions of the Tree of Life. In each case, what is of unalterable significance is, on the one hand, that there are *ten Sefirot* (ie, emanations)⁴; and on the other that these have their precise ordering, even when arranged in a manner that lacks apparent sequentiality.

Of direct significance for our purposes are three specific *Sefirot*: the second, *Hockmah*; the fifth, *Geburah*; and the sixth *Tifaret*. These have meanings that are of course embedded very much within Hebrew, and their translated meanings do not have precisely the same scope or terrain as their English translations. In the case of *Geburah* and *Tifaret*, there are also different translations possible. Significantly, however, these can (and often are) rendered as, respectively, *Wisdom*, *Strength*, and *Beauty*.

Let's see how these are placed on the more common base of the Tree of Life diagrammes, that of Kircher:



I have highlighted in red the pertinent *Sefirot*, each situated, instructively, upon one of three (hereon blued) columns or pillars. The green

4 As the *Sefer Yetzirah*, possibly a circa 2nd century text, states: "Ten Sefirot out of Nothingness: Ten and not nine; ten and not eleven".

arrow indicates the same direction of view that one needs to assume to mimic the Harris tracing board earlier presented. The other tracing board would be viewed from exactly *below*, 'projecting' the lowest central *Sefirot* of Beauty to its pinnacle.

Let's have a closer look at all these things and begin to fuse them into a coherent syncretic whole.

Entering the Lodge room

When we penetrate within the doors of the Lodge opened in the first degree, amidst all the other emblems, symbols and furnishings, we are faced with inner stillness and silence except by instruction of the Master or the two Wardens.

These, in turn, have pillars and lights associated with them.

Reflecting on their combined responsibilities, they represent Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, bringing to mind that, as each also reflects the first⁵ three degrees, we are lead to consider that the work consists in beautifying, strengthening, and the getting of wisdom.

Looking at the tracing board⁶, we note that the pillars, associated with the principal officers, have distinct working tools, and the Sun, Moon and Sacred Star (or all-seeing Eye) surmounts the pillars. As with the stair or ladder upon which are the three virtues of *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*, the luminaries in the sky are not physically within the Lodge room, reminding us that in active work, we transcend the limitations of the walls in which we may consider ourselves to otherwise be.

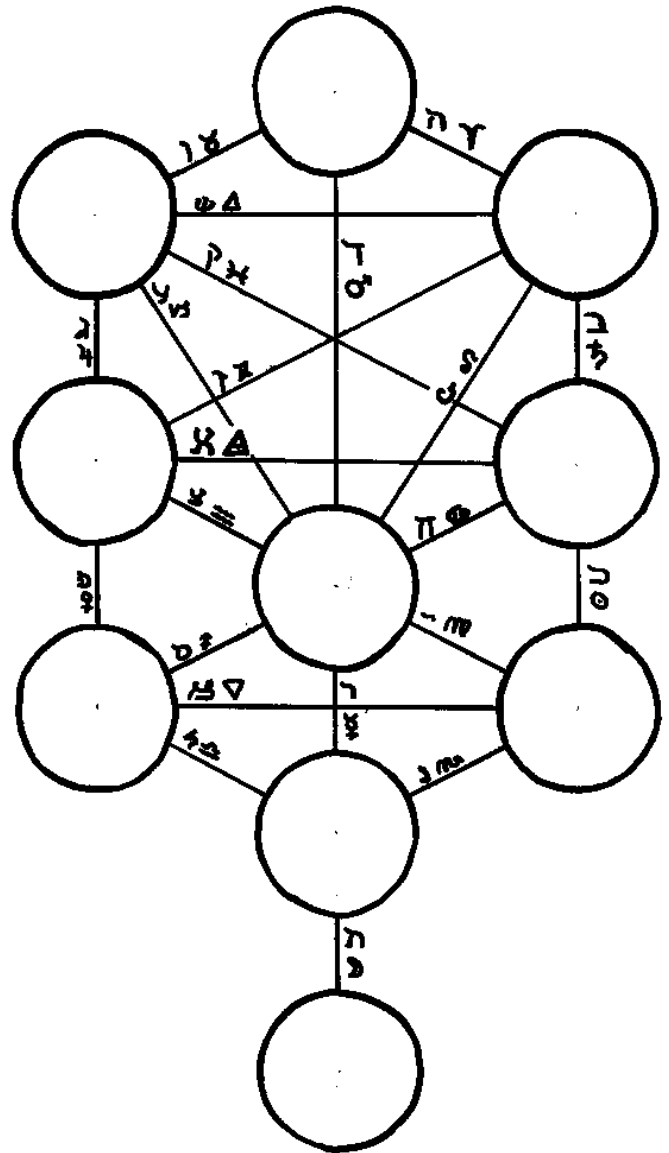
Observing the Tree of Life, we note that each pillar has not only one *Sefirah*, but others. It is each united with the others that form pillars, and so we ascend, with the aid of the plumb-rule, level and square, and the assistance of Faith, Hope, and Charity, towards building those pillars not built by hand. And on these we now turn, taking into consideration each pillar in turn, yet mindful that our ascent spirals, in that the foundations of each pillar needs to be worked before rising to successive levels.

⁵ I am aware that many are of the view that there are only, and precisely, three degrees in Freemasonry. I simply note here that such remains, no matter how dominant and 'officially' pronounced, one amongst other views.

⁶ again, not all Lodges even have trestle or tracing boards.

The Pillars

A friend of mine, both a former Grand Chaplain⁷ and subsequently a Bishop, once described a meditation in which he saw - with the mind's eye - a pebble dropped into a water's surface. The concentric circular rippling that occurred was like the first representation of the Tree of Life I presented earlier. Hence, a hand came down and lifted the pebble, dressed in the gown of the water's surface, giving rise to a Kircher-like (here a Lurianic) version of the Tree of Life:

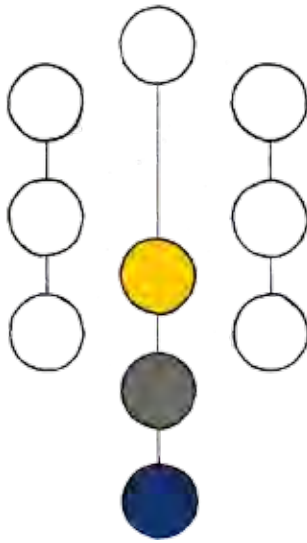


Let's consider each pillar in turn. First the central one of Beauty, then the left-hand of Strength, and finally the right-hand one of Wisdom. In that order, we are also first advancing on those emanations that we reach in their order of *ascent*. Whether the Master or a Warden is there connected I leave to the reader, simply asking that the earlier considerations as

⁷ Lodges warranted under certain Grand Lodges have Chaplains and, in turn, the Grand Lodge a Grand Chaplain. Though the position need not be filled by a priest or other minister of a Church, it often is.

to the Floorplan in use, and the relative placement of the three pillars (when three are used).

Beauty



Beauty, *Tifaret*, is the central golden globe here shown. It is often allied to the Sun.

Somewhere (and I cannot recall the source), I once read that “in *Tifaret*, conflict is reconciled, and contradiction resolved”.

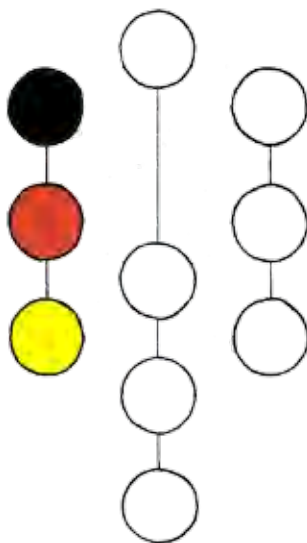
Below it are, respectively, *Yesod* (Foundation) and *Malkut* (Kingdom). As these two are, respectively, often connected to the Moon and

the Earth, we have here an ascent from Earth, to Moon, to Sun, to the Sun-beyond-the-Sun (alluded to in Plato’s ‘allegory of the Cave’ in Book VII of his *Republic*⁸) as *Keter* (the Crown).

The lowest of the two require that we both keep our feet on the ground and that we build a solid foundation before ascending further. We have physical body, and life forces with which to work and direct. These provide initial work.

It is appropriate that the pillar is named by the central *Sefirah*, for the highest reminds one of Enoch: he ‘walked with God, and was not’⁹.

Strength



Strength, *Geburah*, is here the central red emanation. It’s more common translation is ‘severity’, but even in Hebrew, it has another common name: *Pabad*, or ‘fear’ - as in ‘*Pabad* of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom’¹⁰. It should be noted here that *Pabad* is better rendered by ‘Awe’, an aspect intimately connected to the concept of ‘fear’ that seems to have perished.

‘Awe awakens in us the possibility of

8 So here we have both Plato’s concept of ultimate ‘Good’ and Aristotle’s concept of the Unmoved Mover connecting to the highest of realms.

9 Genesis 5:24

10 Psalm III:10. But note also Proverbs 1:7, where ‘Knowledge’ is used in lieu of ‘Wisdom’.

knowledge and wisdom’ may here perhaps also be considered.

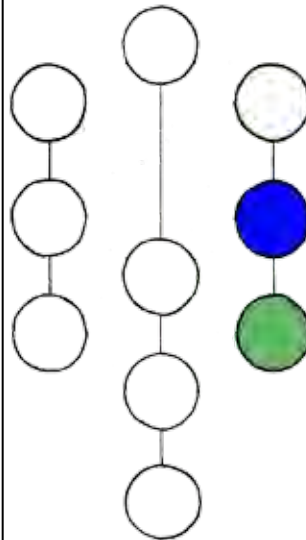
Strength is, of course, one of the cardinal virtues, and central to both Aristotelean and Platonic considerations of what makes a person Good or virtuous, and can lead to a desirable life. As strength, it is often connected with Mars.

Below *Geburah* is the emanation of Mercury, *Hod* or Glory. Combining these, I am lead to reflect on Goethe’s exquisite ‘Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily’¹¹, in which a catechism presents itself:

“What is grander than gold?” inquired the King. “Light,” replied the Snake. “What is more refreshing than light?” said he. “Speech”¹²

Above *Geburah* is *Binah*, Understanding. It has the vast emptiness of fecund space, a space filled with light, but as yet to give birth to object on which such light will be reflected.

Wisdom



Here it is the top *Sefirah*, that of *Hockmah* (Wisdom), that is indicated. It is the closest one can strive to the source of all other emanations.

It also points that all emanation, passing through this *Sefirah*, is imbued with Wisdom, even is layers obscure its glow.

Below are *Hesed*, sometimes translated as Lovingkindness, but also the word used for ‘covenant’: a binding together of willing parties. Below that, at its foundation, sits *Netzah*, victory or reverberation, hinting that each of our acts, feelings and thoughts reverberate and have their own victories beyond the confines we may otherwise wish.

Three Pillars, or two?

And so we finish where we started. The pillars, whether as two or three, call to mind far more than mere ‘lesser’ lights!

11 A ‘fairy tale’ for adults, or at the very least for his brothers in Freemasonry, if ever there was one!

12 sometimes translated as ‘communication’ - something very Mercurial.

Viewing the pillars Boaz and Jachin as the two extremes, we are asked to pass *between* them, reminding those who have taken to heart the study of the seven liberal hearts and sciences that it is the golden mean between extremes that reflects virtue. The extremes also remind us of the two pillars between which our life stands as its own third pillar - between the portals of birth and death¹³.

I am here reminded of the beautiful Masonic pillars that once adorned the sides of the doors of the Würzburg Cathedral (often referred to in various Freemasonic writings). Like Floorplan A and the 18th century tracing board, passing through the pillars leads one to the inner sanctuary whereby the third pillar is implied by the Master in the East - in the case of the Cathedral (and hence for the Christian), by Christ not only crucified, but in Ascension.



If we observe closely the 'knots' of these two pillars, they illustrate clearly that their respective foundation is two-fold: each pillar effectively has two bases, one standing on the ground; the other in the celestial realm. What 'binds' them together appears as interweavings - I would here say the interweavings of life's weavings itself.

And so, we are lead to consider how to best make that binding strong, beautiful and wisdom-filled by further considering the *Sefirot* or emanating spheres on the Tree of Life.

Whether two pillars are represented, or three, there is always an implied third element, each able to guide us in the consciousness of daylight as well as by the darkness visible in the spiritual light of night.

Select bibliography

Aristotle *Physics*

Nicomachean Ethics

Findlen, P. (ed.)

Athanasius Kircher, Routledge, 2004

Goethe, J. W. von *The Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*, online edition at:

<http://wn.rsarchive.org/RelAuthors/GoetheJW/GreenSnake.html>

Jones, B. E. *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium*, (rev. ed.) Harrap London, 1956

Kaplan, A.

The Bahir, Samuel Weiser, 1979

Sefer Yetzirah, (rev. ed.) Samuel Weiser, 1997

Plato *Republic*

Steiner, R. *Toward Imagination*, [GA 169], Anthroposophic Press, 1990



Q. *How high was your Lodge?*

A. As high as the Heavens,
and as low as the Earth.

Q. *How many Pillars had your Lodge?*

A. Three.

Q. *What did you call them?*

A. Beauty, Strength, and
Wisdom

Q. *What do they represent?*

A. Beauty to Adorn, Strength
to Support, and
Wisdom to Contrive.

¹³ R. Steiner also makes this connection between the two pillars and birth and death, between which, he is claimed to have uttered "we have the time of our life" (oblivious to its ambiguity in English). Cf Lecture 3, 'The Twelve Senses', 20th June 1916, in *Toward Imagination*.