

The Two Pillars

The two pillars can be found in the symbolic traditions of many religious traditions and esoteric Orders. Their meaning relates to the duty of the Initiate to bring Harmony into both his own personality and in the world, and relates to the manifestation of universal consciousness in a myriad of material forms. This essay attempts to describe the origin and historical usage of the symbol of the two pillars and to elaborate upon its meaning.

According to the Book of Kings, and recorded by Flavius Josephus in “The Antiquities of the Jews” (written in 79 AD), in about 969 BC, Solomon, King of Judeah, decided to build a Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. At this time the Hebrews were nomads living in tents, while neighboring Tyre had been a rich and prosperous city for over two centuries. Recognizing the Tyrians’ advancement in architecture and the other arts, Solomon appealed to their greater talents to build his temple. When the temple was built the Hebrews ceased their wanderings and became permanently established. As a memorial of this fact, they included in the design of the temple the two pillars, a symbol used by the Tyrians and many other nations descended from ancient Aryan stock, to represent the divine leadership that led them out of enslavement in Egypt and to their new and permanent home. According to biblical account (Exodus 13:21-22), “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night. He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.”

Hiram, the architect sent by King Hiram of Tyre, cast a pair of hollow bronze pillars that stood on the outer portico of Solomon’s temple, one finished in silver and the other in gold and studded with emeralds. Standing in the north, the pillar of silver represented the pillar of smoke and was called Boaz, which signifies strength. Standing in the south, the pillar of gold and emeralds represented the pillar of fire and was called Jachin, which signifies establishment. The manifestation of the deity in Hebrew history as a pillar of clouds and a pillar of fire points to the origin of the two pillars in the earliest recorded Aryan conceptions of the divine presence.

The ancient Aryans were not at a stage of intellectual development where they could entertain the idea of an abstract principle as the one universal law, or of any god except a visible one. To them it seemed impossible that there could be a spiritual essence without some material form. Therefore they used fire, the most inexplicable and striking of the agencies of nature, to represent the Divine; and the sun, the grandest and most brilliant mass of fire, was to them the embodiment of the deity. In the Vedas, written by these ancient people, the clouds were spoken of as attending the rising and setting of the sun. Thus, the Hebrew symbol of a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night refers to the same natural objects – clouds and fire – that were symbols of the presence of the deity to the earlier Aryans.

The idea of using two pillars to symbolize the presence of the deity was not exclusive with the Hebrews. The Spartans also used this symbol and may have borrowed it from the Phoenicians in Tyre or derived it from the same original source. In Sparta the two pillars were said to represent the twin Dioscuri, and were sometimes joined by a smaller horizontal bar to represent their twinship. Tradition relates that Pollux, whose twin brother Castor was killed, was inconsolable over his loss and asked Jove to let him give his own life for that of his brother. To this Jove consented to allow the two brothers to each pass alternate days under the earth. In “The History of Two Pillars” W. L. Fawcette theorizes that the Dioscuri are identical to the two Asvins of the Vedas, the shining mares that draw the chariot of the sun-god Indra on its daily course through the heavens. The Dioscuri are always represented as clad in shining armor and mounted on snow-white steeds, the same chief characteristics of the Asvins. In the Vedas, the clouds attend the sun and are represented as horses, cattle, or beings in human form. Therefore, the Asvins and the Dioscuri represent in two different traditions the clouds that accompany the Divine presence.

Heracles was also equated with the pillars by the Greeks. Legend tells that Heracles (Roman Hercules), after traversing various countries during his twelve labors, raised two mountains in Spain and Africa as monuments of his progress. According to another account, Hercules had little time to climb a high mountain, so he split it into two halves, forming the straights of Gibraltar and opening the Mediterranean Seas to the Atlantic Ocean. Ceuta, the mountain in the south, is covered by evergreen bushes which flower yellow each spring, presenting the impression of the fiery pillar. Gibraltar in the north is a grey limestone monolith, which is covered for much of the year by a cloud gathered from the east wind, thus representing the pillar of clouds. In the East is the familiar Mediterranean Sea, and in the West the unknown mystery of the vast Atlantic Ocean.

Heracles was equated with the Phoenician god Melqart, and the Pillars of Hercules were earlier referred to as the Pillars of Melqart. Melqart, son of El, Ruler of the Universe, was worshipped at the temple erected in his name at Tyre. One of the features of the temple was a pair of pillars, described by the Greek Herodotus as one of pure gold and the other of emeralds which shone brilliantly at night. To the Tyrians the pillars were a symbol of one deity, and they stood at either side of the entrance to the temple, into which only the High Priests could pass through doors of bronze. Similarly, the Holy of Holies, which was to the west of the two pillars of Solomon's Temple, was a secret and sacred place that could be entered by only one High Priest in each generation. It is theorized by William Serfaty in "The Pillars of the Phoenicians" that ancient sailors who were familiar with this symbol would have recognized in the pillars of Ceuta and Gibraltar a religious prohibition from passing between them into the west. This would have been a way for the Phoenicians to prevent others from passing through the straights of Gibraltar, thus ensuring the secrecy of their source of security and military power: the tin mines of the Atlantic European coasts that enabled them to create weapons and armor of bronze.

In Scandinavia the pillars were a symbol of the god Thor and were a prominent feature of his temple, and the setting up of two high wooden posts was a sign of establishment of the household on that spot. The Germanic race, of which the Northmen were a branch, had its origin in the center of Asia near the Caspian Sea, from which source they had derived the same tradition as the Syrians and Greeks. The similarity in the cosmogony of the Greeks and the Northmen supports this idea of a common origin. With this in mind, the Pillars of Thor and the Pillars of Hercules can be regarded as independent perpetuations of the same symbol. The facts that the two pillars were a sacred symbol in these ancient and contemporaneous religions, and that they occupied the same position and significance in the temples of Thor, Melquart, Heracles, and Jehovah, help to confirm the theory of a common source of the mythology and ideas of these and later faiths.

The two pillars are often depicted in esoteric symbolism as an entry to hidden knowledge that permits the balance between opposite forces. This idea of an entry between the two columns leading to knowledge is represented in the Tarot, in which the second of the numbered cards in the Major Arcanum depicts the High Priestess. Shown sitting between two pillars or columns, one white and one black, she represents the sum of esoteric knowledge, the balance between extremes, and the creative force in manifestation. The black column represents the negative life force, and the white column represents the positive life force. Between the columns is a veil covering the hidden world of wisdom. The veil is usually decorated with palms (the male element) and pomegranates (the female element), which represent the reproductive force in the subconscious that allows ideas to be made manifest.

In Masonic symbolism the pillars stand on either side of the entrance to the Masonic lodge and represent the pillars of Solomon's Temple. The pillar of Joachim represents the solar, masculine, active, positive, expansive principle of light; the pillar of Boaz represents the lunar, female, passive, negative, containing principle of darkness. The idea of duality is also represented by the different architectural styles of the pillars, the pillar representing Joachim being Doric, and the pillar

representing Boaz being Corinthian. A third, Ionic, pillar depicted between the other two symbolizes the balanced, conscious, coordinating principle that keeps them in dynamic equilibrium. The diagram of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life is often placed against the backdrop of three pillars, with the outer two representing the polarization of all manifestation, and the central pillar representing the path of knowledge and ascension that leads to the source of all manifestation.

W. Kirk MacNulty, in *Freemasonry: A Journey through Ritual and Symbol*, provides an interpretation of the two pillars that relates to the essence of the psyche. The pillars are said to be made of brass and cast in the clay ground – characteristics that relate them to the physical world. They are also said to be hollow and to contain the archives of the Order. Thus, the pillars represent the archival record of the memory, which is stored in the personal unconscious and relates to events in the physical world. MacNulty suggests that the duality of the pillars represents the idea that memories which constrain and inhibit are found in one place, while those which enliven and move to action are found in another. He writes:

The memories such as those stored in the two columns... have a profound, though unconscious, effect on individuals and society alike. At the individual level they compel and circumscribe a person's behaviour, while at the social level they define the society's concepts of morality. Circumscribed behaviour of this sort is useful (even essential) to enable an individual to fit into a family and its immediate social circle, particularly during childhood; but adult behavior which is thus circumscribed is often unrewarding, frequently unproductive, and sometimes actually harmful. Likewise, social groups which have defined their morality in this way have, throughout history, generally found themselves in serious conflicts with other similar groups, conflicts which have generally led to much grief and bloodshed.

Thus the path between the two pillars into the Middle Chamber of the Soul indicates that one can attain the higher consciousness when one becomes free from the arbitrary psychological constraints imposed by one's upbringing and society and instead learns to work with and apply to daily life the opposing permissive and restraining forces of morality that reside within one's own conscience (parallels can be drawn with the super ego/ego ideal described by Freud and the emotional and intellectual complexes identified by Jung). Similarly, Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, defines myth as "a manifestation... in metaphorical images, of the energies of the organs of the body in conflict with each other." He describes the great realization of the Upanishads of India in the 9th Century B.C. that "Heaven and Hell are within us, and all the gods are within us... They are magnified dreams, and dreams are manifestations in image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each other."

In other esoteric tradition the pillars appear at either side of the entrance to the initiation Chamber. The one in the north is black, and the one on the left is red. They support an arch with the golden Lyre of Orpheus at the top. The fact that the pillars differ only in color indicates that they are identical in their essence and differ only in appearance, just as one universal consciousness is present in all things and differs only in its physical manifestations. The pillars represent pairs of opposites: good and evil, life and death, light and darkness, essence and substance, spirit and matter, heat and cold, man and woman, reason and faith, authority and liberty, right and duty, harmony and discord, initiative and resistance, etc. Astronomically they represent the equinoxes of summer and winter.

The initiate entering the initiation chamber between the pillars represents that it is the task of the initiate to find the third term that reconciles the opposing terms into a single principle of harmonious unity: the Law of Equilibrium. This intermediary term is symbolized by the Arch, which the pillars support, and by the Lyre at the top, itself a symbol of Harmony, signified by two equal arms resting upon the base of the instrument. The white robe of the Initiate and the white altar cover are also symbolic of the third pillar which unifies or reconciles the opposing forces into harmony (when the

visible colors of the spectrum are harmonized into unity, the reflected color is white). The number 3 is a symbol of this conciliating principle and, for this reason, figures largely in mystical teachings. The third principle has given birth to the dogma of the Trinity, which is found at the base of all systems of Theogony. Among the Egyptians the third term between the masculine Osiris and the feminine Isis was the infant Horus. For the Hindus, Shiva is the transformer who reunites the powers of Brahma, the Creator, and of Vishnu, the Savior. To the Kabbalists, Kether, the Absolute equilibrant, combines Chocmah, the Absolute Wisdom, and Binah, the absolute Intelligence. In the Christian Theogony, the Holy Spirit is the universal force that animates and acts as mediator between the Active Principle of the Father and the Savior Principle of the Son.

From another standpoint, the two opposing pillars represent the perfectly balanced forces of spirit and matter, also represented by the interlocked triangles of the hexad. Yet, only an insipid and monotonous action can result where the forces of attraction and repulsion are evenly balanced and where no variation occurs. Consider, for example, a piece of music consisting only of harmony and no discord. No life can be expressed without movement, and movement cannot be initiated without impulse, or the urge of Desire. On the other hand, life cannot be maintained without poles of attraction and counter attraction. Therefore the balancing forces, along with a third term that throws them out of static harmony and into dynamic equilibrium, are equally necessary for life. The third term is the momentary destroyer of the harmony, the universal creative impulse that is the vital force of all living creatures. It throws the perfectly balanced forces out of stasis, causes spirit to descend into matter and matter to rise into spirit. In *Genesis*, the serpent represents this third term. The serpent is the agent of the temptation and therefore the initiator of activity. It is called *Nâhâsh*, which means the power that puts life in motion, the attraction of self for self. The Greeks called this power Eros, Love, or Desire. At the suggestion of the serpent, Adam and Eve eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – the knowledge of opposites. Their Desire for knowledge is the third principle, the impulse of free will that causes the so-called fall and deprives man of his perfection. In reality, it is the initiation of life.

After eating of the tree, Adam and Eve move out of the Garden of Paradise, where there is no time, where man and woman do not know that they are different from each other, and where God walks among them. Now they are in the field of duality, where they perceive themselves as opposites and cover their shame. The story of the fall thus represents a shift from the consciousness of identity to the consciousness of participation in duality. Adam and Eve have thrown themselves out of the Garden of Unity by their recognition of duality and have moved into the field of space and time, in which all things are opposites. All things that man can perceive and conceive are dual in character. Everything he knows is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, before and after, here and there, I and you. He thinks in terms of opposites, and each principle presents itself to his mind as two different and distinct things in opposition. So strongly marked is this duality of appearance that most people accept each of the two aspects as being separate and independent, rather than varying degrees of manifestation of a single principle.

Without contraries, nothing could manifest to man. How could he know good if he had no experiences of its absence? How could he know light without darkness or positive without negative? All force demands a resistance; all light a shade; all convexity a concavity; all vacuum a receptacle; all rulers a realm; all sovereigns a people; all labor an unpolished stone; all conquerors a subject of conquest; affirmation establishes itself through negation; the strong triumphs only in comparison to the weak; aristocracy manifests itself only when rising above the proletariat. However, none of these seemingly separate or independent conditions exist alone. For example, drought and flood are not two disconnected events, but actually two opposite aspects of rainfall. The One and the Many are identical, differing only in the degree of manifestation. Spirit and Matter are not two separate things. Rather, matter is crystallized Spirit, and Spirit is sublimated matter. This last comparison gives a clue to transmutation, a process of raising or lowering vibrations (the third principle, momentary destroyer of

equilibrium, points out the little known laws of the invisible universal force spread everywhere and is an all powerful force in the hand of the Initiate). Thus, everything physically manifest is dual; having two aspects that are identical in nature and differ only in degree. The second tree in the Garden of *Genesis*, the Tree of Eternal Life, represents the return to the plane of consciousness in which one identifies oneself with the unifying principle that transcends and harmonizes the opposites. Campbell states that this tree is symbolized by the cross of Jesus, whose words "I and the Father are One" are an expression of this doctrine.

When Yahweh threw man out of the Garden, two cherubim were placed at the gate, with a flaming sword between them. These guardians are also depicted at Buddhist shrines, one with his mouth open, the other with his mouth closed. They represent fear and desire, a pair of opposites that bind man to the material realm of opposites. By passing through fear and desire, one exits the material field of opposites – the dual realm of space and time – and enters the realm of the eternal, which is defined as the absence of space and time. To walk the middle path between the pillars is to transcend the illusions of duality and to identify oneself not with the material body, but with the consciousness and the impulse of life for which the body is only a vehicle. Along with the identification of oneself with consciousness, or spirit, comes the understanding that the true nature of all other beings is also spirit, and that every individual is but a seemingly separate material manifestation of a single universal consciousness that pervades the universe. This realization is the basis of the concept of Fraternity, the doctrine that all individuals can be likened to cells comprising the one body of humanity. When one realizes that he and the other are one, and that the apparent separateness is but an effect of the way man experiences forms under the conditions of space and time, acts of selfless charity become second nature, for by serving one's brother, one serves the highest part of himself: spirit.

Coming to the realization that oneself is but a temporal and spatial manifestation of a single Divine consciousness, or universal law that orders all things, is atonement (at-one-ment) with God. Yet, at-one-ment does not result from a mere intellectual recognition of divine unity. The universal consciousness must become manifest in one's own personality, which is a center for the interplay between the forces of balance and impulse. The Initiate must see through the illusion of opposites to understand their inherent unity and must apply this understanding to the mastery of his own being. Like Nature, Man is made of a number of instincts and qualities that are seemingly opposite. Since ancient times it has been recognized that the seven pairs wisdom/foolishness; wealth/poverty; fruitfulness/childlessness; life/death; dominion/dependence; peace/war; beauty/ugliness are the ones which most affect man's successful progress through life. The Initiate should repeatedly check the actions of his life against these seven pairs and take the reconciling middle position by maintaining a balanced integrity. The Initiate who can affirm, "I come from between the pillars" has walked the middle path through the turmoil and troubles of life and has preserved his composure. As an agent of Omneity he is commissioned to a life of activity in a world of seeming contradiction and confusion, from which he must work to bring his own individual pattern of harmony.

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