

From A to Z

A Cautionary Tale of Cryptic Masonry

One of the things that is worthwhile in Masonry is to study our Ritual and try to consider it from a different perspective. Today, we look at two characters who are prominent in our Cryptic Degrees, but are otherwise obscure. Each has what we call a ‘fatal flaw’ (ἁμαρτία, or *hamartia*, in ancient Greek tragedy and philosophy). By ‘fatal’ we do not necessarily mean that it leads to one’s death, but mean the older sense of it controlling our fate or destiny. I believe that each of us, as men and Masons, has at least one ‘fatal flaw’ that we must be on guard against. Hence the classical admonition γνῶθι σεαυτόν, ‘know thyself’ inscribed over the doors of ancient temples. Consider an ashlar taken from the quarries in its rude and natural state. Such a stone may look whole and suitable on the outside, but may contain an unseen crack or blemish, that under the stress of working tools, the weight of a building pressing down on it, or water seeping into the rock and freezing, may suddenly burst forth. The Temple is no stronger than its weakest part. Keep this in mind as we proceed.

Zabud is one of the most curious but relatable characters who appears in the higher Degrees of Masonry. Although he keeps cropping up in both the York and Scottish Rite, he remains relatively obscure. In the Select Master Degree, Zabud stumbles upon a secret project of the greatest importance and sensitivity through the most innocent motives. In the Sixth Degree—Confidential Secretary—of the Scottish Rite, he likewise blunders into an argument between two of the Grand Masters. In both cases, his motives are misunderstood and he is nearly put to death. However, once his reasoning is explained to King Solomon, he is given a reprieve and lavished with even greater honors. He also figures in other Scottish Rite Degrees. His mention throughout several such Degrees in both rites suggests a common source of many of the legends.

Like me, most of you had probably never heard of Zabud before. This little-known character occurs in exactly one verse in the Hebrew Scripture:

*And Azariah the son of Nathan was over the officers; and **Zabud** the son of Nathan was principal officer, and the king's friend.*

1 Kings 4:5

Although he only occurs in a single verse, using minor Biblical characters to illustrate moral lessons is a longstanding part of the rabbinic tradition—the most famous example of course being GMHA himself. It seems plausible that what we now call the Hiram Legend developed as part of the tradition of embellishing Biblical history in stories and parables to make a moral point. There are numerous examples of this in Talmudic literature using figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, a practice used by Jesus Himself.

But this is all we know of Zabud from Holy Writ. This verse occurs in the midst of a passage describing King Solomon's main officials and advisors—his Cabinet as it were—and who are referred to as 'princes' in the King James. These include two Scribes (Elihoreph and Ahiah), a Recorder (Jehoshaphat), the Captain of the Host (Benaiah), Priests (Zadok and Abiathar), and Zabud. Then we read two other names well-known to us—Ahishar, who oversaw the household, and Adoniram, who oversaw the tribute or levy. This suggests that Solomon's Court had a full complement of officers similar to those in a Royal Arch Chapter or Masonic Lodge. We know that Zabud was numbered among King Solomon's 'princes,' that he and his brother Azariah were sons of Nathan the Prophet, who had rebuked Solomon's Father, King David, over his adultery with Bathsheba—which does not appear to have caused any bad blood between him and Solomon—and among the group, he alone is referred to as King Solomon's 'friend.'

When I first received the Select Master's Degree, it seemed to me that Zabud was nosy and presumptuous. Who was he to be entitled to know all the King's business? To understand better his role, we must delve into the Hebrew. The word rendered 'princes' is הַשָּׂרִים (*hasarim*), where שָׂר (*sar*) means prince, captain, chieftan, governor, or vassal; essentially a subordinate official under the king. The word 'officer' is נָצַב (*natzab*), meaning deputy or appointed officer, evidently a subordinate officer under the *hasarim*. And 'principal officer' is כֹּהֵן (*kohen*)—a word which is almost always rendered 'priest' but who can also mean 'one who officiates'. This is a word of great significance in Judaism, a *kohen* being not only an ancient priest, but a rabbi, sage,

or holy man, having official duties about the Temple, where he would have been in close proximity to King Solomon.

Zabud is also referred to as the 'king's friend,' or רֵעֵה הַמֶּלֶךְ (*re'eh ha-melek*). The word רֵעֵה (*re'eh*) is usually translated 'friend' in the King James Bible, but can also be rendered 'companion'. This word is only used in connection with one other person—Hushai, King David's friend. Hushai played a significant role in interceding on King David's behalf during the attempted coup by David's son Absalom. Zabud was evidently his successor and played the same role to Solomon as Hushai did to David. Evidently, the 'king's friend' was a formal position, most likely unique, not merely one of several casual friends. The role played by Hushai suggests that Zabud was most likely King Solomon's closest advisor, a confidant and emissary who most likely performed sensitive duties on behalf of the King. The word *re'eh* is also related to the root verb רָעָה (*ra'ah*) meaning to graze, pasture, or shepherd, the same root used in Psalms 23:1—'*The Lord is my shepherd.*' Thus, it implies a tender and protective relationship, one of watching over the king and protecting him from his enemies.

With that understanding, Zabud does not seem presumptuous, but rather it seems understandable he'd feel hurt at being excluded from the secret work. He would have necessarily enjoyed nearly unfettered access to the King and all parts of the Temple. His apparent betrayal must have been a bitter shock to the King. Yet he still comes off as a well-meaning but impetuous bumbler. Zabud is a sympathetic character—how many of us have had the distressing experience of having our motives misunderstood? Letting our enthusiasm run away with us? Of meaning well but being being critized and maligned? One way to interpret Zabud's character is as one who failed to keep his fervency and zeal within due bounds.

Ahishar, on the other hand, teaches the opposite lesson. Ahishar had a similarly exalted rank, being head of the King's household...a position described in the Select Master Degree as the 'Grand Steward.' He was among the favored twenty-seven. And yet, he was careless and lackadaisical in performing his duties, which event caused him to forfeit both his position and his life. This caused him to be succeeded by Zabud, hence our cautionary tale.

Ahishar is the polar opposite of Zabud. While Zabud represents the Mason whose fervency and zeal get the better of him, and whose best intentions lead to ruin, Ahishar represents the Mason who is lazy and lax in his duties, and who takes his position and privileges for granted. He cares more for titles and positions than he does doing the work of the Craft. Like the two pillars and the two parallel lines, we should avoid either extreme—rash action and sloth—and instead keep our enthusiasm tempered with prudent wisdom. Let us rather heed that most Masonic admonition of *duty for duty's sake*, laboring *without the hope of fee or reward*.