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“The Adoption Rite, its Origins, Opening up for Women, and its ‘Craft’ Rituals”

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Keywords

Freemasonry, woman, *The Adoption Rite*, *Grand Orient de France*, *Harodim* lodges.

Resumen

Este trabajo consiste en explicar las siguientes preguntas: ¿Cuándo el *Rito Adopción* empezó? Tuvo sus raíces en la tradición *Harodim* en el siglo XVIII en Inglaterra. Desde 1726 hubo también logias de esta tradición en París. ¿De dónde viene el *Rito Adopción*? Fue creado en Francia como una versión modificada del rito, que se utilizaba en las logias *Harodim*. ¿Por qué y en qué circunstancias se creó? En la década de 1740 las logias *Harodim* fueron sobrepasadas por logias modernizantes. Al mismo tiempo, las mujeres francesas querían ser iniciadas. Como respuesta a ambas situaciones, las logias *Harodim* en el continente, comenzaron a iniciar a las mujeres a partir de 1744. ¿Cómo los rituales obtienen su forma? Los dos primeros grados del *Rito* en uso en las logias *Harodim* fueron modificados en el *Rito de Adopción* de tres grados, un rito de calidad excelente, y el segundo de los grados del nuevo *Rito* fue diseñado como un profeminismo.

Abstract

This essay aims to explain the following questions: When did the *Adoption Rite* begin? It had its roots in the *Harodim* tradition in the early 18th century in England. From 1726 onwards there were also lodges of this tradition in Paris. Where did the *Adoption Rite* come into existence? It was created in France as a modified version of the Rite, used in the *Harodim* lodges there. Why and under which circumstances was it created? In the 1740s the *Harodim* lodges were ousted by Moderns lodges. At the same time, French women wanted to be initiated. As a response to both, the *Harodim* lodges on the continent started to initiate women from 1744 onwards. How did the rituals get their form? The first two degrees of the Rite in use in the *Harodim* lodges were reworked into the Adoption Rite of three degrees, a Rite of superb quality, and the second of the degrees of the new Rite was designed as a proto-feminist one.

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“The Adoption Rite, its Origins, Opening up for Women, and its ‘Craft’ Rituals”¹

Jan Snoek

On June 10, 1774 the *Grand Orient de France* regularised the Adoption Lodges, which had already existed for about 30 years, and gave them new rules. I will present here a summary of the results of my research, conducted over the last seven years, about the rituals practiced in the Adoption lodges. The main questions, which I shall try to answer here, are: Why, where, when and under which circumstances did the Adoption Rite originate? And: How did its rituals get their form?

Prevailing Conceptions

There are many prevailing conceptions about the Adoption lodges, repeated in the literature concerned over and over again, but most of which my research have shown to be plainly wrong. Among these usual ideas are the following:

- *Adoption lodges were lodges in which only women were initiated.* This became so only in 1774, after the recognition of the Adoption lodges by the *Grand Orient de France*. The first Adoption lodges initiated only men. From 1744 to 1774 they initiated both men and women. For example, according to its financial administration, the ‘Loge de Juste’ in The Hague initiated between February 5 and May 1°, 1751, ten men and two women.
- *They would be called Adoption lodges because they were subordinated under a male lodge.* This too became so only in 1774. The first known Adoption lodges that initiated women, such as those in Jena (1748), Copenhagen (1750) and The Hague (1751), were completely independent and had no relationship whatsoever with a male only lodge. The word ‘adoption’ in this context has a completely different meaning than generally assumed. An ‘Adoption lodge’ is a synonym of an ‘initiation lodge’ as opposed to a ‘lodge of instruction’ or a ‘table lodge’.
- *The men were initiated in that male lodge.* Again, this describes the situation from 1774 onwards.
- *The officers of the lodge were partly male (especially the Master), partly female.* This seems to

¹ The article was first published of this article was in *Transactions of the Manchester Association for Masonic Research* 101 (2010): 95 - 112. The copy right of the article remains with the MAMR (Web: <http://www.mamr.co.uk/>).

have been the practice from a very early time onwards, possibly even since 1744. For example, the Adoption lodge in Jena initiated in its first meeting three women, one of which was at once appointed “Inspectrice, [female] Warden and Positrice [= Dépositaire]”, i.e. Warden.

- *Male Masons (having at least the second degree) had free access to the Adoption lodges.* That was one of the rules introduced in 1774.
- *Female Masons, however, never had access to the male lodges.* As far as the mainstream male lodges are concerned, that is correct.
- *The Adoption lodges were created by the men in order to put an end to the attempts of the women to get access to Freemasonry.* This is a speculation, often forwarded to explain why Adoption lodges, initiating women with special rituals, would have been created. However, it is definitely incorrect.
- *But it was not real Freemasonry.* That too, is definitely not true. Famous in this context are the statements by De Tschoudy, who thought that Adoption lodges were a “nice trifle” (“agréable bagatelle”), Jouaust, who called them a “gracious innovation”, and an “innocent recreation”, and Thory, who wrote that:

The Freemasonry of women, like that of men, has its several rituals; the main objective of these associations was almost always the same in all lodges. Balls, concerts, feasts, acts of charity, affectionate but respectful relationships form generally the basis of their work.

- *The ritual used in the Adoption lodges is strongly deviant from the real one.* It was indeed different from that practiced in the mainstream male lodges, but it was the ritual practiced in some very aristocratic male lodges, which stood in the Harodim-tradition.
- *The rituals did not change over time.* This claim is never formulated explicitly, but it is implicit in all those publications which give ‘the’ rituals of the Adoption lodges. Actually, the many more than a hundred rituals I collected show that, on the contrary, they changed just as much as the rituals known from the mainstream male lodges.
- *According to some authors, the Adoption Rite originated as early as the 1730’s, while others estimate its start as late as the 1760’s.* For example, Clavel assumed that “Freemasonry for women was instituted around 1730, but that its forms were only fixed definitely after 1760”. The year 1760 probably intends to indicate the time when the then Grand Master, the Count of Clermont, must have started his lodge, which seems to have also initiated women with the rituals of the Adoption Rite. But no positive evidence seems to exist which could support such

an early date as 1730 for the start of the initiation of women in masonic lodges. However, we have a printed source from 1744, a booklet called *La Franc-Maçonne*, stating explicitly that it had just recently started. And I have found no evidence from before that date. But only shortly later, in February 1746, an Adoption lodge was explicitly mentioned to exist in Bordeaux.

- *There would have been no Adoption lodges in England.* However, printed editions of the Rituals in English were published in 1765 and 1791, while the first edition in French is only from 1772, seven years after the first English one. Obviously, a publisher does not produce a booklet if there is no target-group to buy it, so Adoption lodges probably existed in England from at least 1765 onwards.
- *The Adoption Rite would have been restricted to 4 degrees since 1779, when Louis Guillemain de Saint Victor published his rituals for these four degrees.* The rituals I collected show this assumption to be plainly incorrect too.

Summary of the History of the Adoption lodges

Let us now turn to an overview of the historic events, which led to the initiation of women in the Adoption lodges. We all know about two masonic traditions in England in the 18th century: that of the so-called ‘Premier Grand Lodge’, also called the ‘Moderns’, and that of the so-called ‘Atholl’ Grand Lodge, also called the ‘Antients’. In fact there was, however, yet a third one. The Antients and the Moderns did not agree about much, but there was one thing on which they did agree, namely that this third tradition did not exist. In order to crush it, they usually behaved as if it did not exist, and in the end it indeed disappeared as an independent organisation of Craft lodges. But in the early 18th century, this tradition, associated with the names of the Harodim and York, was very much alive. It was characterised among others, by the fact that its rituals were not only based on the story of the building of the Temple of King Solomon, but included many other biblical stories as well.

In 1688, King James II of England had gone into exile in France and lived there in his court in Saint Germain-en-Laye, slightly west of Paris. His supporters, and those of his son and his grandson, are known as the Jacobites. In London king George reigned from 1714. He had come to London from Hanover, and therefore his supporters were called the Hanoverians. In 1726 the first lodge seems to have been founded in Paris. Its members were Jacobites. Further lodges founded in Paris were Jacobite as well. These lodges worked in the ‘Harodim’ tradition. Only in the 1730s, were the first Hanoverian lodges, working in the tradition of the ‘Moderns’, were founded in Paris.

In England, around 1700, several sources report about Freemasons, that, for example, “The manner of their Adoption or Admission, is very formal and solemn and with the Administration of an Oath of Secrecy”. This shows that ‘adoption’ was an English word, used, in

a masonic context, as a synonym of ‘admission’ or, as we would say today, ‘initiation’. The term ‘Adoption lodges’ is probably intended to distinguish them from ‘Instruction lodges’ and ‘Table lodges’. These texts do not specify the masonic tradition to which they pertain, but since they are too early for the ‘Antients’, and no trace of such a terminology is found with the ‘Moderns’, this terminology is probably specific for the Harodim. We may thus assume that it was used in the early lodges in Paris as well, since these too were Harodim.

The culture in France, however, was very different from that in England. Whereas in the latter ‘men’s clubs’ were an accepted phenomenon, in France womenfolk did not accept their exclusion. When we see then that in 1744 the first women were initiated in France, it seems that this happened precisely in such Jacobite Harodim lodges, which referred to their initiation lodges as Adoption lodges. Of course, these lodges were not obliged to submit to the interdiction against initiating women, formulated for the first time by Anderson in his *Constitutions* for the ‘Premier Grand Lodge’ in 1723, as long as they did not subscribe to that particular Grand Lodge. The case of Elizabeth Aldworth-St. Leger, who was initiated at the estate of her father, Lord Doneraile of Doneraile Court in the County Cork in Ireland, shortly before she married in 1713, often quoted as an example of an exception to that rule, is in fact none at all, since the initiation took place at least ten years before Anderson formulated his ban for the first time.

In the 1740s the Hanoverian lodges ousted the Jacobite Harodim lodges in all of Continental Europe. The last ones responded by transforming themselves into Scots Master lodges or, from 1744 onwards, Adoption lodges initiating women. These were the circumstances under which, in the Adoption lodges, the first two degrees of the Harodim Rite were transformed into the three degrees of the Adoption Rite. In 1725 exactly the same had been done by the Moderns, who in England had transformed their two-degree system into the today taken for granted trigradal system, by re-distributing the available material over the three new degrees: Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason.

Overview of the Adoption Rite

In 1744, the Rite of the male Harodim lodges was published in the booklet *Le Parfait Maçon*. It describes four degrees. The theme of the first degree was that of the fall described in Genesis 3, and depicted on its first degree tracing board (Image 1). The themes of the second degree were Noah’s Ark (from Genesis 6-9) and the Tower of Babel (from Genesis 11), depicted on the second degree tracing board (Image 2). The two tracing boards for the third degree show the Tabernacle (Image 3) and the Temple of King Solomon (Image 4) respectively. Probably, since the lodges of (both) the Moderns (and - later - the Antients) worked with degrees based on the theme of the Temple of King Solomon, that subject was left out of the newly created Adoption Rite, in order to prevent conflicts with those lodges. The fourth degree -of which *Le Parfait Maçon* gives no tracing board, only a description- centred on the re-building of the Temple of Jerusalem, after the Babylonian Exile, under Zorobabel. The Antients (and then also

the Moderns) would later hijack this degree as the Royal Arch.

The Adoption Rite starts with a first degree in which three themes are superficially touched upon (Image 5): Noah's Ark (from Genesis 6-9), the Tower of Babel (from Genesis 11) and Jacob's ladder (from Genesis 28). The last theme was probably borrowed from the *Ordre Sublime des Chevaliers Élus*, the first masonic chivalric Order, also created within the French Jacobite masonic context. The similarities between the descriptions of Jacob's ladder in the catechisms of the rituals of the Adoption lodges and of the *Ordre Sublime des Chevaliers Élus* are striking. The second degree is an elaboration of the old first one, based on the story of the Fall from Genesis 3 (Image 6). The main themes of the third degree are the same ones as those of the first one, but with the addition of further stories from Genesis, and from a new perspective, created in the second degree (Image 7). Mainly it can be regarded as the continuation of the old second degree. The new degree, then, is the first one, which foreshadows what will be revealed in fact only in the third. The function of this new first degree seems mainly to have been to have the candidate swear an oath of secrecy, before accepting him or her to the second degree. And, as we shall see, to keep the contents of the second degree secret may well have been for good reason.

Eve's Emancipation

The second degree, then, is the pivot of the Adoption Rite. This is clearly seen from the illustrations on most of the aprons used in the Adoption Rite, which show the Tree from the Garden of Eden in the most central position. In this degree, the Candidate plays the role of Eve. Evidently, this could easily be offensive for the women concerned, since the story of the Fall has been used over many centuries in order to suppress women. There are indeed texts in the rituals which we would be inclined to understand that way, but apparently these were not understood in that sense then. In fact, as we shall see, the story in the ritual of the second degree is also subtly, but significantly, different from the Biblical version.

Of course, the ritual is a re-enactment of the story of Eve. In the traditional version, the snake gives Eve a fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which she eats and gives to eat to Adam. After which "the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil ..." (Genesis 3:22). But in the ritual, the Candidate, in the role of Eve, takes the apple and gives it to the Master, who—here as well as in all 18th century masonic rituals—plays the role of God. He takes it and gives it back to Eve, saying: "Now receive the fruit from the tree which is in the midst [of the garden of Eden]; as soon as you will have tasted from it, you will become as one of us, knowing good and evil". Furthermore, some of the rituals give a password, pronounced by Eve, namely: "Lama sabachthani" which means, according to the ritual: "Lord, I have only sinned because thou hast forsaken me". This is a very clear reference to the Biblical text: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" in the gospel according to Matthew (27:46). What we see here is that, even though Eve is not made identical to

Jesus, she is put at the same level. That this is indeed intended is confirmed by the fact that the Candidate (still in the role of Eve) sits after her initiation at the right hand of the Master (who, as we saw, plays the role of God). And in the Bible there are several places where it is stated explicitly that the place on the right hand of God is that of Jesus. As we shall see, the rationale behind placing Eve at the same level as Jesus is that both sacrificed themselves in order to open a door to Felicity.

The central concept of the Adoption Rite, which is not very different from that of 18th century Freemasonry generally, is that virtue is the key to felicity. However, to do good without knowing what is bad is no more than naivety. To act virtuously is to do good, when knowing the alternative. So, one can be virtuous only once one knows, and admits to know, both alternatives. However, he or she who is virtuous may find felicity not only after death, but even in this life in this world. In fact the rituals of the Adoption lodges suggest that this felicity is to be found within the company in the lodge of Brothers and Sisters who strive after the same goal:

... you must compare the favor which we accord you by introducing you into the abode of felicity, with the assembly of Brothers and Sisters among which you have just been admitted, and [see it] as a second terrestrial paradise where our table and the food which we eat there must be regarded as the tree of life and the knowledge of Masonry.

To this felicity, it is Eve who has opened the door. By her identification with Eve, the Candidate is thus transformed from a naive child into a virtuous and felicitous woman. What we see here is a complete inversion of the traditional Biblical and theological interpretation of the story of the Fall: Eve is not the first sinner, but, on the contrary, placed at the same level with Jesus. She has conscientiously taken the burden of Sin on her in order to open for us the door to felicity in this life. Within Roman Catholic theology, a similar interpretation of the Fall was known under the name of *Felix Culpa*. This degree, then, is life-affirmative, oriented towards life in this world, instead of that after death. The ritual is even proto-feministic, in that it presents Eve as the first initiated, at the same level with Jesus, and as an example to be imitated.

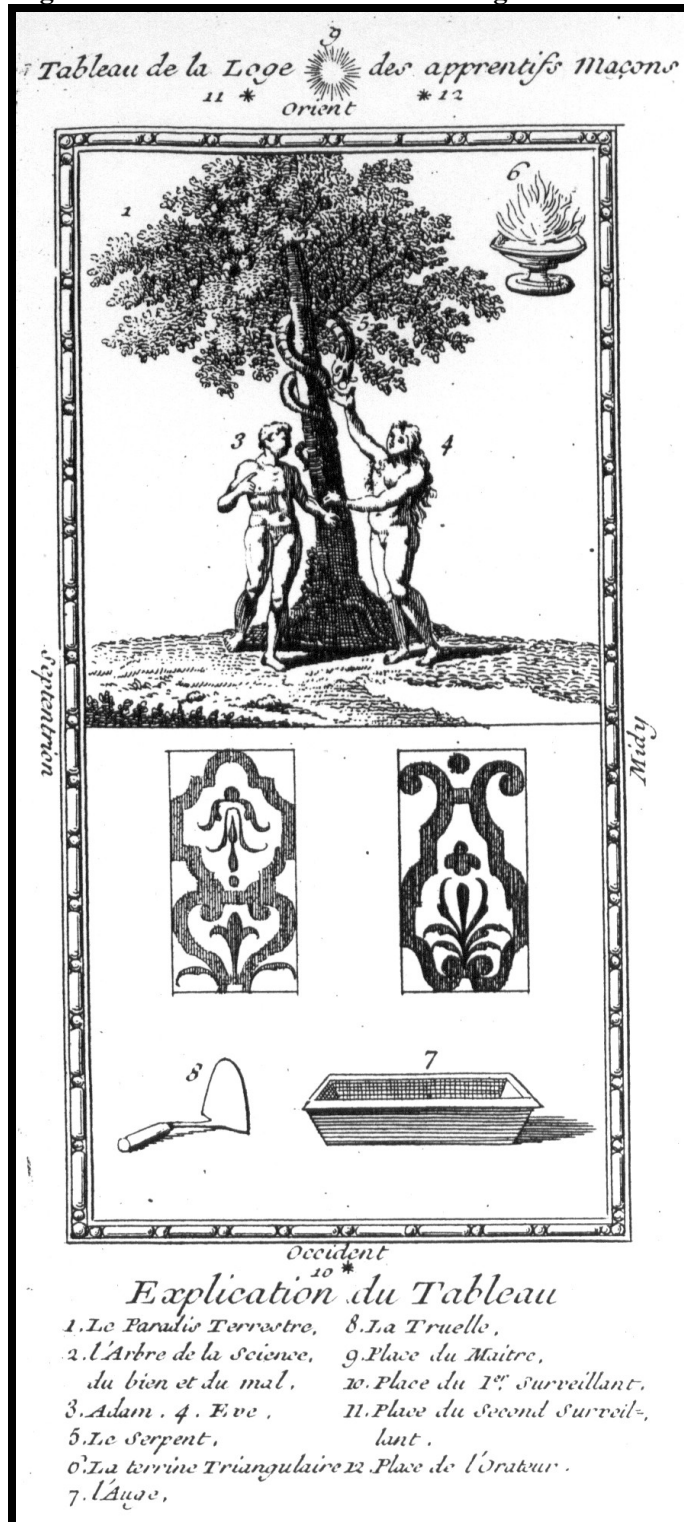
What we must realise is that the members of the Adoption lodges in the 18th century included the highest court nobility. Among them were the Princesse de Bourbon, from 1775 until the French Revolution *Grande Maîtresse de toutes les loges d'Adoption en France*; the Princesse de Lamballe, *Grande Maîtresse particulière (= Vénérable) de la loge d'Adoption de la Mère Loge Écossaise 'Le Contrat Social'* in Paris; and, during the first Empire, the Empress Joséphine, again in the function of *Grande Maîtresse de toutes les loges d'Adoption en France*. These women knew their Bible and classical literature very well and could therefore play the game. The Adoption lodges with these rituals remained popular until the fall of Napoleon in 1815. Then they slowly became less and less popular, probably because during this time the 'wrong' representation of the story of the Fall was 'corrected' and thus turned into something not at all attractive for the women. From 1901 onwards, new Adoption lodges were founded under the

Grande Loge de France, which eventually led to the formation of the *Grande Loge Féminine de France* (GLFF). In 1959 this Grand Lodge then chose to work with the rituals of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. Today, only lodge 'Cosmos' -which united the Sisters who refused to follow this change and at first worked as an independent lodge before it was reintegrated in 1977 into the GLFF- still works with a version of the Adoption Rite.

It is interesting to see that from about 1744 to about 1815 the Adoption Rite was upheld by very aristocratic women and included the ritual for the second degree with the inverted story of Eve. From about 1815 until the end of the 19th century, the Adoption lodges fell into the hands of the middle-class. One now discovered the 'errors' in the story of Eve and 'corrected' them. The result was a ritual conforming to the traditional story of Eve. No wonder that the women lost their interest in this form of Freemasonry! When from 1901 onwards, new Adoption lodges were opened, the women involved were of a completely different background again: now they were feminists. Of course, when they saw these 19th century rituals, they completely removed the story of Eve already in 1902: "one votes to suppress the ritual of the 2nd and 3rd degree which would seem ridiculous and are unacceptable". Had they known and understood the 18th century rituals, they might have decided differently.

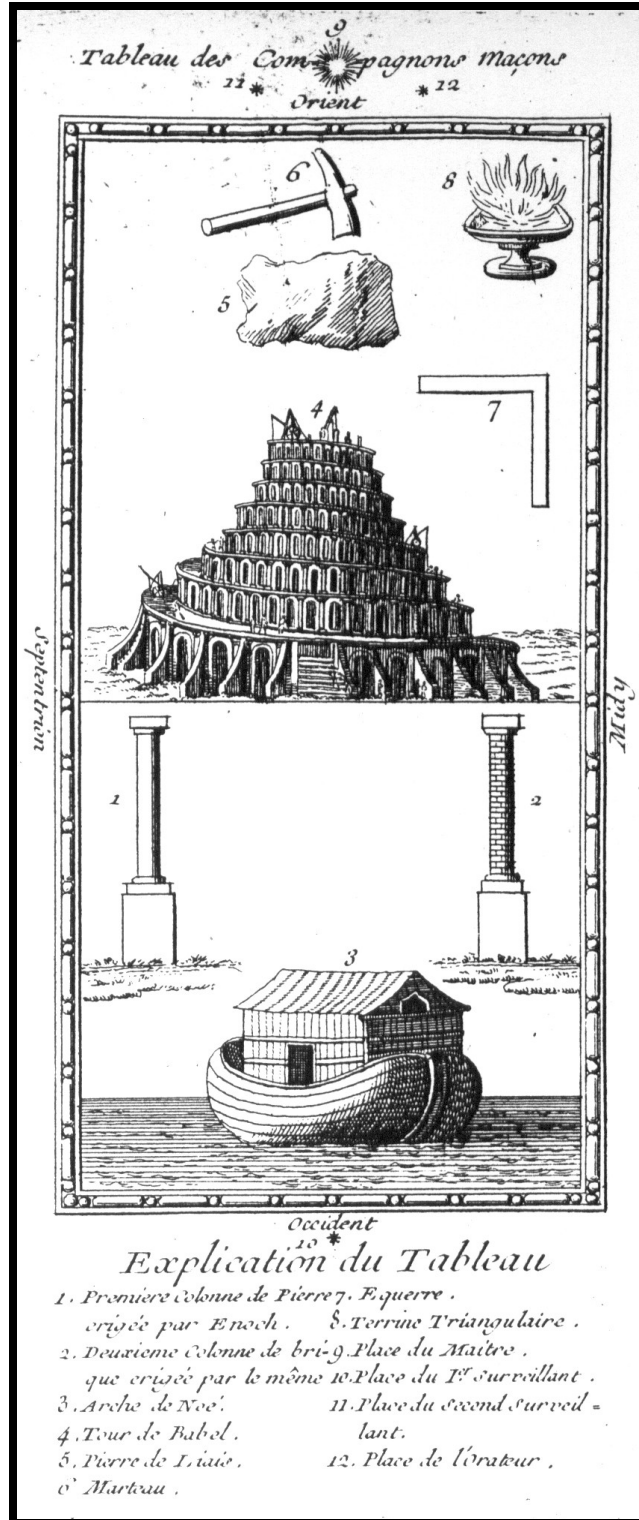
In conclusion, we may say that the rituals of the 18th century Adoption Rite were anything but just a toy for the girls. On the contrary, they in fact have much in common with those of the 'Royal Order of Scotland', which continues the 'Harodim' tradition, and is often regarded as the *summum bonum* of Freemasonry.

Image 1
First Degree of Rite of the male Harodim lodges based in Genesis 3



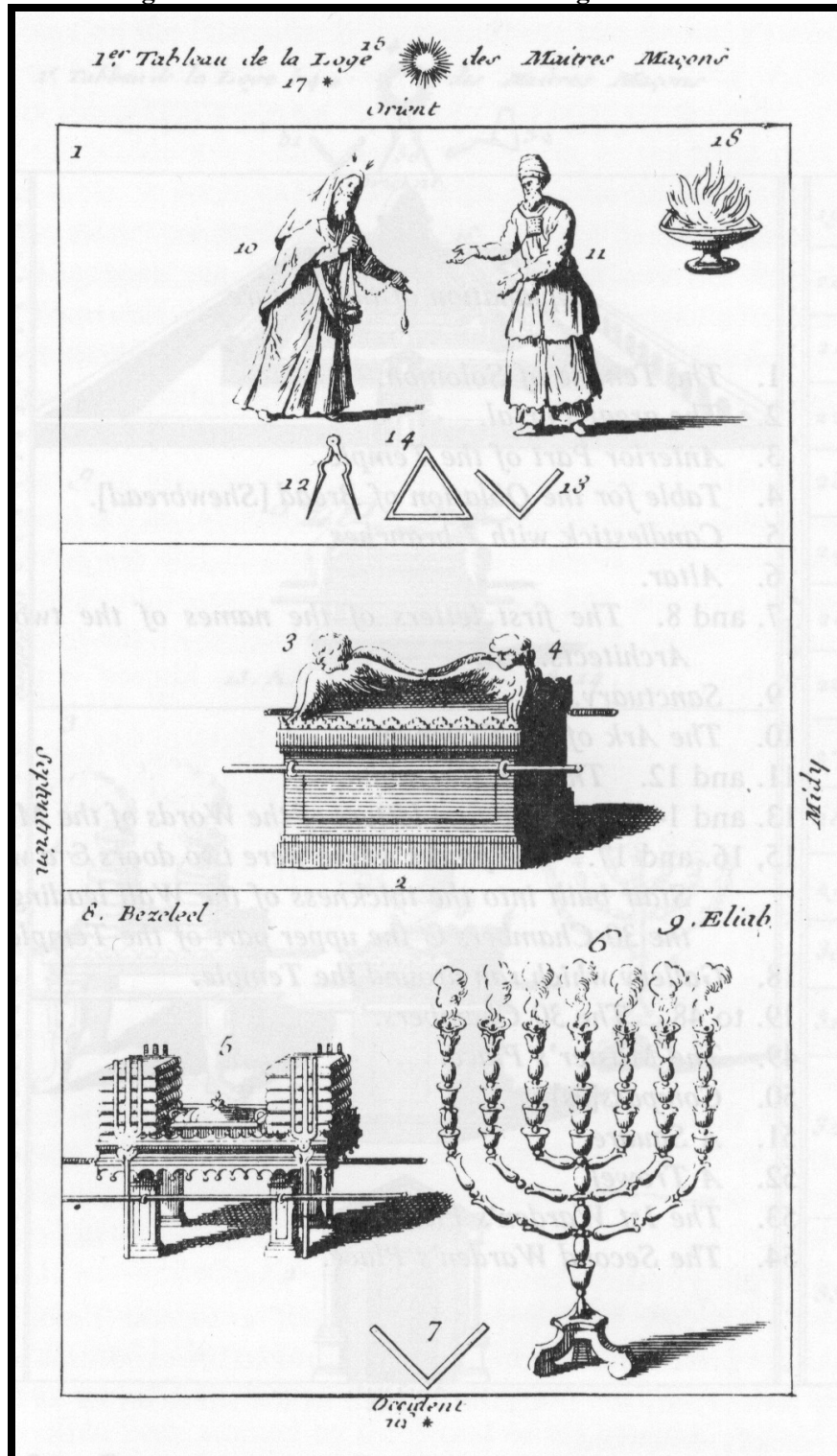
Source: Le Parfait Maçon (1744).

Image 2
 The themes of the Second Degree of Rite of the male *Harodim* lodges were Noah's Ark



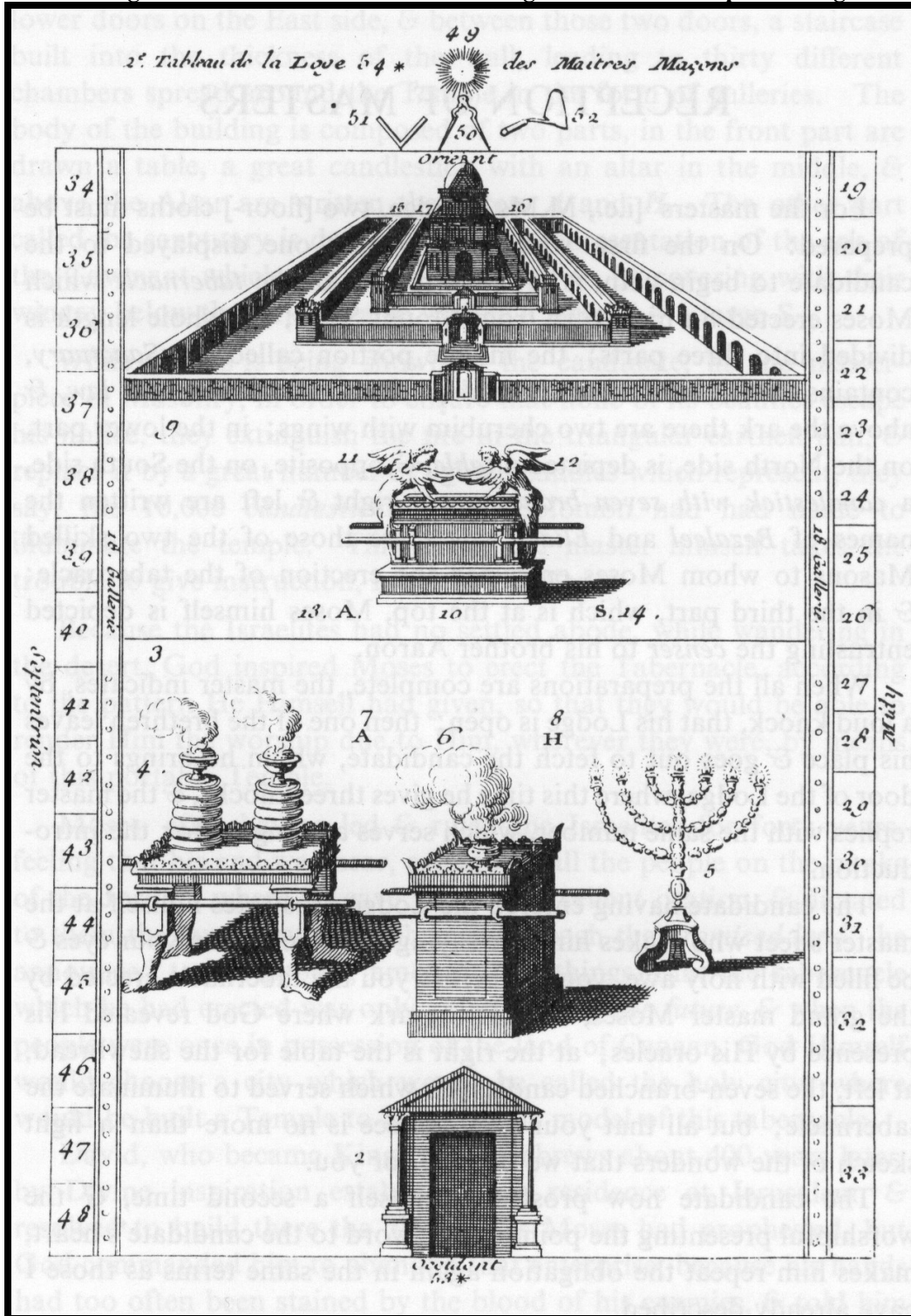
Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

Image 3
The Third Degree of Rite of the male *Harodim* lodges shows the Tabernacle



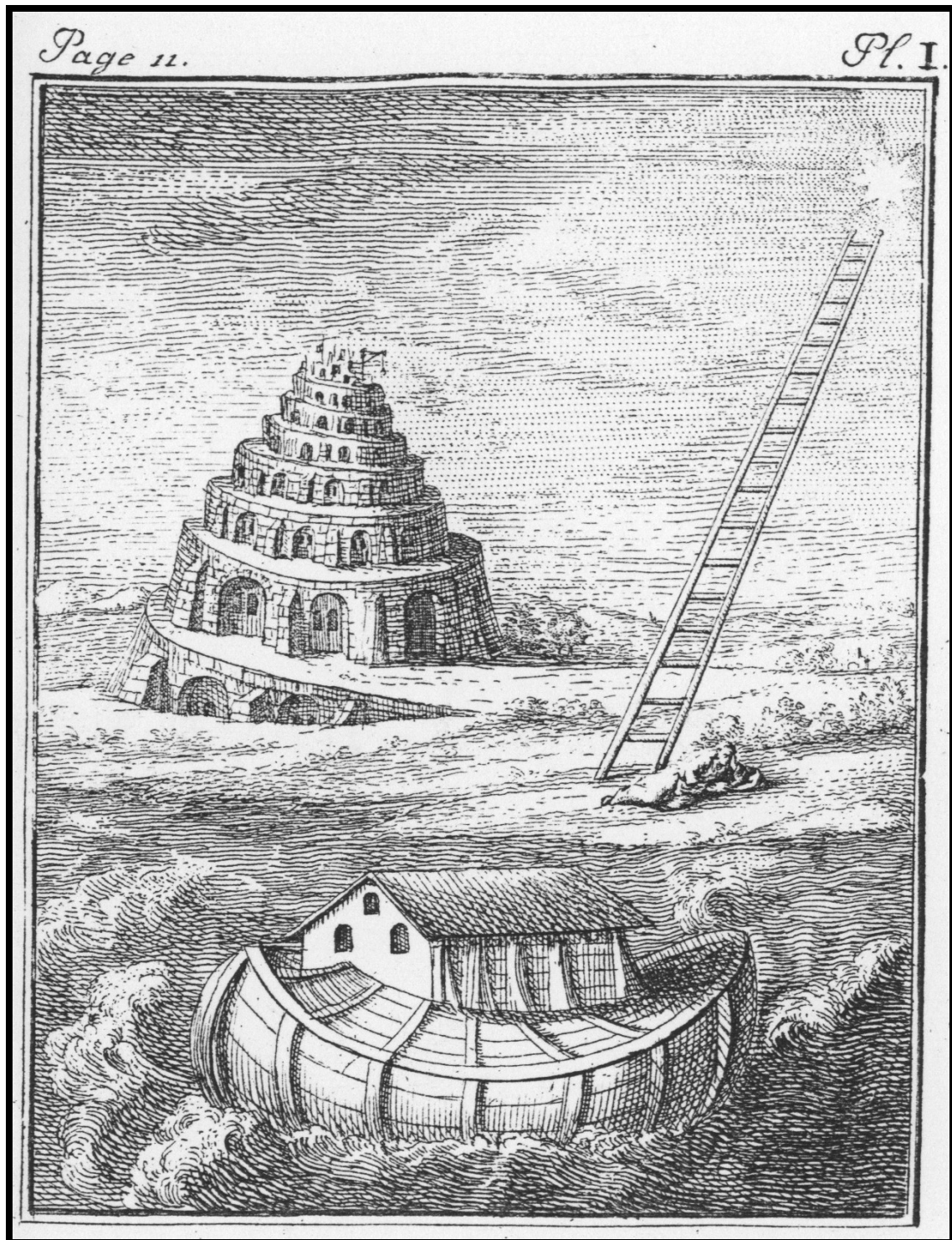
Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

Image 4
The Third Degree of Rite of the male *Harodim* lodges shows the Temple of King Solomon



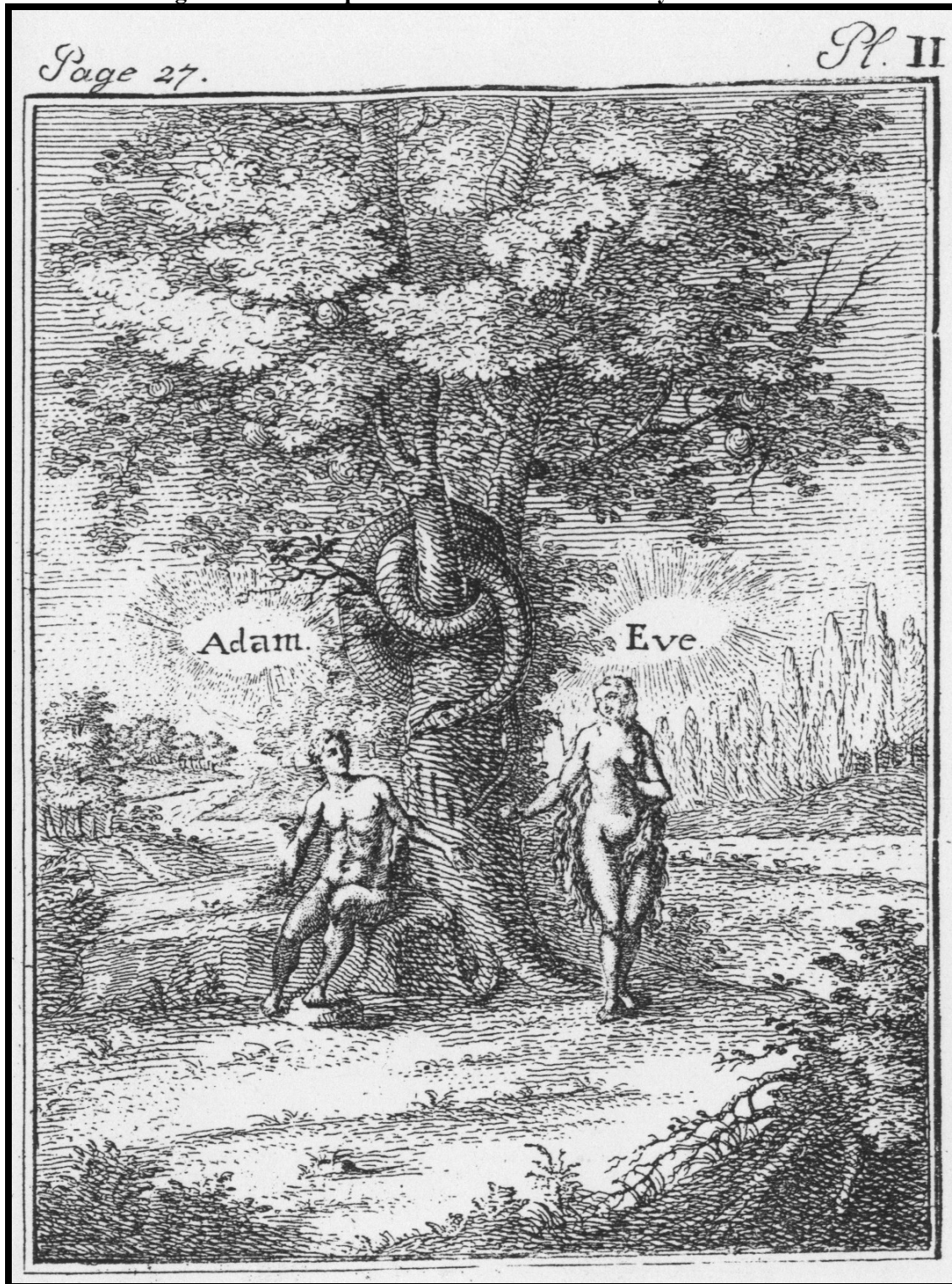
Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

Image 5
The First Degree of The Adoption Rite has three themes: Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel and Jacob's ladder



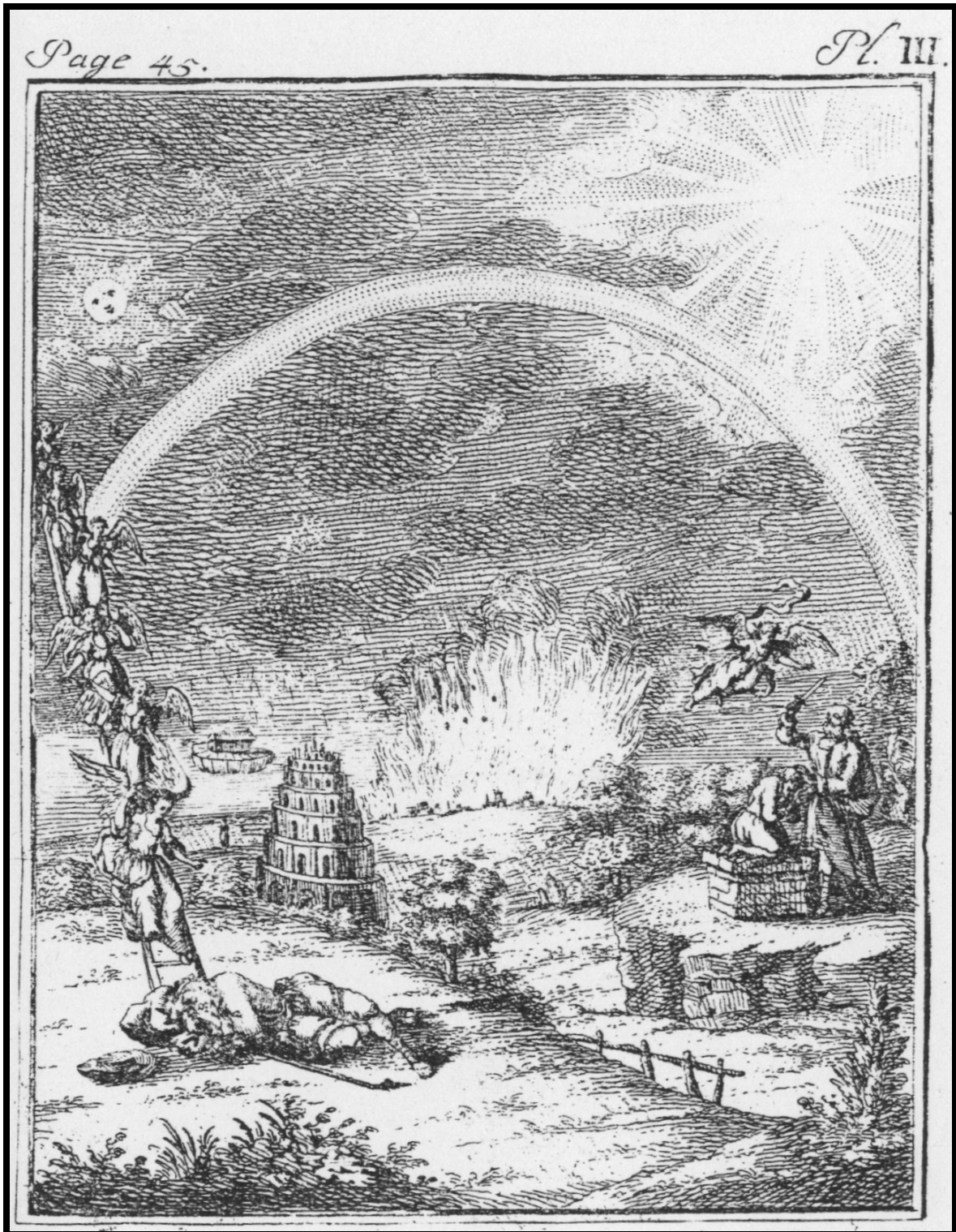
Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

Image 6
The Second Degree of The Adoption Rite is based on the story of the Fall from Genesis 3



Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

Image 7
The Third Degree of The Adoption Rite shows further stories from Genesis



Source: *Le Parfait Maçon* (1744).

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