AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: THE ROLE OF PRINCE HALL FREEMASONRY IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

John D. Baskerville
University of Northern Iowa

An Address Delivered at Palestine Chapter #28, Order of the Eastern Star's Annual Honors Banquet

Saturday, June 11, 1994
Newell Street Community Center
Waterloo, Iowa

"Am I my brother's keeper?" was the response Cain gave to the Lord when asked about the status of his brother Abel (Genesis 4:9). Unbeknownst to Cain, the question he posed to the Lord would continue to confront all of humankind throughout the centuries. History informs us that throughout time, most have answered this question ("Am I my brother's keeper?") with a definite "No, my brother is responsible for himself." But, on the other hand, there have also been those exceptional few who have answered the same question posed by Cain with a resounding "Yes, I am my brother's keeper." Those who answer the question in the affirmative know, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr (1968) once stated, "All life is interrelated. . . . We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother [or sister]. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (cited in Riley 1993).

The three women we are honoring here tonight (Sis. Maggie Johnson, Sis. Estell Schuler, and the late Sis. Annie Brown) represent the best of humanity because they have answered Cain's

question in the affirmative. They have adopted philosophies of living that embrace the aspects of justice, truth, charity, enlightenment, freedom and liberty, honesty and integrity. These women have proven themselves worthy, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the hearts of their fraternal sisters and brothers. They represent the standard that we, in the Masonic family, should attempt to emulate and strive towards, because our customs and rites instruct us to use "the tools of moral and ethical truths to serve mankind." Because of these principles, Freemasonry is "the most imitated of all fraternal organizations" (Williams 1980).

It has been said that black Freemasonry and its allied houses are merely a "mirror image of white Freemasonry," but upon closer examination of the black Masonic structure, we discover that several differences exist between the two Masonic institutions. According to Masonic historian Loretta J. Williams,

> The black Masons have . . . acted upon the internalized service role in differing ways and are increasingly cognizant of the actual and potential power of their organizational unity and autonomy (Williams 1980).

While the black Masonic family throughout its history has "chosen to identify with universal Masonry . . ." it is the advancement of the African-American community which has remained an essential part of black Freemasonry's mission and which distinguishes it from the other Masonic organizations world-wide.

The advancement of the African-American community as an essential component of black Freemasonry can be traced back to the colonial period in American history and to our founder, Prince Hall. Prince Hall was born in Bridgetown, the capital of the Island of Barbados, in 1748. He was the son of a white Englishman and a free black mulatto woman (Crawford 1914). Since the civil status of children was determined by the free or enslaved status of the mother, in theory, Hall was a free black man; but in reality, any black man living in Barbados or anywhere in the Western hemisphere during this time period was never truly

free. In 1765, at the age of seventeen, Hall left Barbados working on a ship headed for Boston.

At this time, some sixteen thousand black people lived in New England, almost all of them slaves and reduced to the level of social outcasts (Bennett 1968). It was among Boston's relatively small free black community that Prince Hall considered home. It was not long before Hall began to gain a level of social and cultural consciousness concerning the status of the African-American community.

> Prince Hall moved around Boston with eyes open and he was appalled by the social and economic conditions of slaves and free Afro-Americans. Even more appalling to the sensitive youth was the indifference of colonial patriots.

Boston "was a center of the American slave trade" and "most men of substance benefitted from the trade," including many of the leaders of the American Revolution (Bennett 1968).

Besides Boston's connection to the TransAtlantic slave trade, the free blacks of the city experienced dehumanizing discrimination and segregation at several levels. They faced

discrimination and prejudice in employment, housing, politics, education, as well as social life. For example, in most places of worship, blacks were either barred from attending religious services altogether or they were segregated within the churches, relegated to the high galleries of the churches commonly designated as "Nigger Heaven" (Crawford 1914).

> The audacity, the sheer effrontery, of American patriots fascinated Hall. The colonists held in servitude more than a half million human beings, some of them white; yet they proposed to go to war in support of the theory that all men were created equal (Bennett 1968).

The disgraceful conditions in which the black population existed made such a heartfelt impression on Prince Hall, "that early in his American career he determined to prepare himself to become a religious teacher and leader among [his people]" (Crawford 1914). Hall knew that the church was the center of African-American life and that the African-American minister "has always been an influential factor in the leadership of [the] race . . . ." The ministry would give him an opportunity to conduct

activities which would make him a recognized leader and spokesperson for his people" (Crawford 1914).

Within ten years of his arrival in Boston, Hall had saved enough money to buy property and became a Methodist minister, achieving both by working during the day and studying at night. Also within these ten years, he had become a talented organizer of African-American people and "one of the leading lights of the first Freedom movement" (Bennett 1968). According to African-American historian Lerone Bennett (1968):

> As one of America's first abolitionists, Hall made a big contribution to the movement that led to the erosion of slavery in the North. As organizer and leader of the first black organization outside of the black church, Hall also made an important contribution to the development of black morale and solidarity. . . . [He] learned the value of an organizational base . . . preaching the virtues of solidarity and collective action . . . (Bennett 1968).

Hall's greatest contribution to the African-American people was the organization of the first black Masonic lodge. In 1774, Prince Hall and fourteen other free black men petitioned for

admittance to the white St. John's Lodge of Boston, the first Masonic lodge officially established on American soil. This was not the first time African-Americans had petitioned the lodge for membership. In 1730, African-Americans had attempted to join the Masonic organization, which outraged some of its white members (Williams 1980). Turned away from Boston's St. John's Lodge, Prince Hall and the others applied to a lodge attached to British regiment stationed near Boston and on March 6, 1775 they were all initiated into Masonry. According to Masonic history:

> When the British regiment withdrew [due to the British losing the war], the black Masons formed . . . African Lodge No. 1, one of the first black organizations in America. After the war, Hall was granted a charter from the Grand Lodge of England. On May 6, 1787, African Lodge No. 459 was formally organized in Boston with Hall as master (Bennett 1968).

Why did Prince Hall and the others feel it necessary to become Masons even though many of them had obtained high stature among their community? There are several answers to this question. First of all, the most powerful and influential men in

the United States during the colonial period were members the fraternity, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. As Loretta Williams (1980) states:

> Prince Hall Masons appear to have hoped that Masonic ideology would have the power to motivate white Masons to re-evaluate the black man's position in America. By adherence to the dictates of the ideology, the mainstream Masons would move to eradicate the racial contradictions in the new society . . . (Williams 1980).

Secondly, Prince Hall knew that the Masonic lodge, like the black church, could be a powerful institution to build black solidarity, social consciousness, and collective action.

> The founding fathers . . . [of Prince Hall Freemasonry] created and developed the black body out of activism and carried their thrust for freedom throughout society. . . . Rather than the lodges serving as places for intellectual and abstract escape from the world . . . they provided the setting for genuine impact on the whole black population.
> .....
> Having internalized the Masonic duty to help others, the black Freemasons, as individuals and as a collective entity, were actively involved in the affairs of the fledgling nation (Williams 1980).

In 1797, Hall as Grand Master helped to establish more African lodges throughout the new nation, making Prince Hall Masonry the first black national organization in United States history. The first Eastern Star and the Heroines of Jericho chapters would eventually be formed in North Carolina in 1880. With this national black network now established, Prince Hall Masons became a strong, active force within the African-American community working for the betterment of African-American people. For example, Richard Allen and Absolom Jones, the founders of the first black independent church (the A.M.E. church) were Prince Hall Masons. Prince Hall Masonic lodges served as stations for the Underground Railroad, which aided over one hundred thousand slaves escape to freedom in the North (Williams 1980; Franklin and Moss 1994). After the Civil War, the first black elected politicians during Reconstruction were all Prince Hall Masons. And, the black Masonic family (the men and women alike) built schools for black children and homes for the elderly during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

But, of all the community activities conducted by the Prince Hall Masonic Family, it was during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that they made their greatest contributions to the African-American community. Vidal A. MacKinnon, the Most Worshipful Grand Master of Massachusetts in 1960 urged Prince Hall Masons living in the North to "renew their commitment" to the fight for civil rights. MacKinnon (1960) wrote:

> We as Prince Hall Masons, particularly in the North, should not stand idly by, smug in the feeling that we are secure and safe from the conditions of oppression or segregation. . . . It therefore behooves us to join forces with those attempting to eradicate these evils once and for all (cited in Williams 1980).

In 1951, the Prince Hall Masons legal research department was established under the authority of the Honorable Thurgood Marshall, a thirty-third degree Mason, "to funnel contributions from lodges" into the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. The Prince Hall Masonic family raised a half-million dollars for the Brown court case which ended school segregation. These are just a few of the

ways that Prince Hall Freemasonry has worked to advance the African-American community. But what is most interesting, these activities by the black Masonic family were carried out with little or no fanfare.

While the condition of the African-American people have improved over the past decades, our work is far from being finished. According to recent studies:

> By almost all aggregate statistical measures -- [which include] incomes and living standards; health and life expectancy; educational, occupational, and residential opportunities; political and social participation -- the well-being of both blacks and whites has advanced greatly over the past five years. [But] by almost all the same indicators, blacks remain substantially behind whites (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

While many of the problems that we face as African-Americans are due to years of racial oppression, there are some problems which we help to perpetuate. In the present day, African-Americans "account for nearly one-half of all prison inmates in the United States" and, at the same time, they are disproportionately the

victims of violent crime, with the crimes being committed by other African-Americans. In addition, birthrates among African-American teenagers are two to three times higher than that of whites, with twenty percent of all African-American births occurring among teenage mothers (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

African-American scholar and theologian Cornel West has stated that "the most basic issue now facing black America" is the nihilistic threat (West 1993). Webster defines nihilism as "a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless." West defines it as ". . . the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness." As a result, we find young people who have abandoned traditional moral and cultural beliefs. Young people who have basically given up on the system, because they feel that the system has abandoned them. They have given up on the future and each other. Personal, instant gratification becomes the primary goal -- they have no time to wait for the rewards of hard work. They engage

in self-destructive behavior, behavior that not only destroys themselves, but all of those around them.

New models of leadership and new strategies are needed from within the African-American community before nihilism threatens to eradicate many African-American communities across this nation. These new models of leadership must originate at the grassroots level among the African-American masses, because we can no longer depend on anyone else doing it for us.

We, in the Prince Hall Masonic family, have an important role to play in the rescue of our people. We must take our message of morality and virtue from behind the secured walls of the lodge and into the streets of our community. We must not only be examples of virtue and morality, but we must become the teachers and guardians of virtue and morality in our communities. We must reach out to our young people and teach them that there are truths, such as right and wrong. And that these truths can be found in the Holy Scriptures and in the words and actions of Jesus Christ. By reaching out to the young people of our

communities, we will not only be helping to advance our communities, but we will also be helping ourselves.

We help ourselves by preparing the next generation of fraternal sisters and brothers who can continue to carry our message of morality, virtue, honesty, and integrity to the African-American masses. Not only this, but these young people can bring new ideas and energy to the fraternity and the struggle for African-American survival. Across this nation, the estimated average age of a person with Masonic affiliation, black or white, is over 50 years of age. Rarely do we initiate new members under the age of 30. In some areas, the number of new memberships have reached such an all time low that many lodges, both black and white, are resorting to media advertising to attract new members (Williams 1980). Our fraternity is too important to our community to let it die of old age. We must reach out to young people not only for the survival of our race, but also for the survival of the fraternity.

Secondly, we must come together with other institutions, organizations, and individuals in our community who are trying to develop new strategies of survival for the African-American people. We must support these institutions individually and collectively, while staying within the parameters outlined in the Masonic Landmarks to avoid political endorsements and agendas, but realizing that power exists in large numbers of people working together. We must continue to realize that "the obtainment of civil rights is considered consistent with Masonic principles and highly unlikely to cause divisions" among the membership (Williams 1980).

Finally, we all must be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve our goal. We must put aside all of the petty differences of the past and join together (men and women) as a Masonic family to ensure our survival as a fraternity and as a people. Recently, Most Worshipful Grand Master Bursie Williams gave me a memo entitled "Bones -- Which One Are You?" It says:

Someone once said, "The membership of an organization is made up of four bones. There are the wishbones, who spend all their time wishing some else would do the work. There are jawbones, who do all the talking, but very little else. Next come the knuckle bones, who knock everything everybody else does. And finally, there are the backbones, who carry the load and do all of the work."

.....

What kind of bone are you? Do you wish to change part of your anatomy? The opportunity is there for you for the taking. Your lodge, in fact, the entire organization is always in need of members who agree to be willing fingers, or a strong right hand, or a shoulder to the wheel. Then, stand tall and be a backbone, secure in the knowledge that your change in anatomy, your urge to have input felt by your lodge can impact on the present and future direction and dimension of your lodge [and community]. Be a doer, a backbone, a real supporter of your lodge [and community] (Author Unknown).

These are the questions we need to ask ourselves. What type of bone do we want to be. Prince Hall was a backbone. Past Grand Master Thurgood Marshall was a backbone. We need more backbones like Sis. Maggie Johnson, Sis. Estell Schuler, and the late Sis. Annie Brown. We must be willing to stand up and answer

Cain's question in the affirmative. "AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER? YES, I AM!."

THANK YOU

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. (1968). Pioneers in Protest. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

Crawford, George W. (1914). Prince Hall and His Followers: Being a Monograph on the Legitimacy of Negro Masonry. New York: AMS Press, Inc.

Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. (1994). From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans, 7th Ed., New York: McGraw-Hill.

Heckethorn, Charles William. (1965). The Secret Societies of All Ages and Countries, Vol. II. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books.

Jaynes, Gerald David and Robin M. Williams, Jr. (1989). A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press

Muraskin, William A. (1975). Middle-Class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Riley, Dorothy Winbush. (Ed.). (1993). My Soul Looks Back, 'Less I Forget: A Collection of Quotations By People of Color. New York: HarperCollins Books.

Waite, Arthur Edward. (1970). A New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books.

West, Cornel. (1993). Race Matters. Boston: Beacon Press.

Williams, Loretta J. (1980). Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.