

The morality of *Hávámál* through the eyes of a Freemason

Introduction

The present essay examines the moral ideas and ethical message expressed in the old Icelandic poems *Hávámál* and compares them with those found in Masonic writings. Particular attention is given to the first section of *Hávámál*, the *Guests' Section* (*Gestaþáttur*), as it is mainly there that the poem sets out specific moral or ethical ideas.

This essay draws on written sources. While attempts have been made primarily to select quality academic works, writings of many types are cited in connection with individual points. The study is based on the interpretation and examination of the materials; no theories were adopted, or assumptions made, in advance.

The main aim of the study is to throw light on the moral ideas found in the *Gestaþáttur* section of *Hávámál*, on the one hand, and the Swedish Rite of the Masonic Order on the other.

The question which the study attempts to answer is: **To what extent do the ethical ideas and moral teachings set out in the *Guests' Section* of *Hávámál* correspond to those found in Freemasonry?** This main question can be broken down into the following sub-questions:

What is in common between the moral teachings of these two systems, and in what do they differ?

What are the relationships, connections between, and possible roots of, these ideas?

Would the author of the *Gestaþáttur* have been favourably regarded in a community of Freemasons?

I would like to thank the brethren who helped with the writing of this essay, the directors of the Snorri Research Lodge and Jakob Kristjánsson, Kristinn Ágúst Friðfinnsson, Ólafur Magnússon and Stefán Einar Stefánsson for reading the manuscript and making valuable comments.

The Eddic Poems

The oldest Icelandic literature that has come down to us are the Eddic Poems. These represent one of the two branches of poetry that were cultivated in the Old Norse world; the other consisted of skaldic poetry (also known as *dróttkvætt* poetry). They are believed to have been preserved and transmitted orally for a considerable length of time before first being committed to writing, on parchment, in the 13th century. As to when they were first composed in their original form, little is known, but they are certainly more than 1,000 years old. Most scholars believe that the individual poems vary greatly in age. It can be considered probable that some of the poems, or parts of them, came into being in Norway not later than the early 9th century, while the latest additions or revisions could have been composed or made in Iceland as late as the 13th century.¹

The Eddic Poems preserve memories that can be traced back to the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era and illustrate ideas in the Germanic world long before the introduction of Christianity and Latin-based culture from the Mediterranean region. Amongst other things, the poems embody the moral basis that underpinned Norse people's ideas about life itself, right and wrong,

¹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Íslensk bókmenntasaga I*, 115-116.

friendship, love, death, honour, covetousness, generosity, revenge and other aspects of human existence.²

These attitudes are found not least in *Hávámál*, a didactic poem which stands apart from the other Eddic Poems, most of which are about gods and heroes. *Hávámál*, by contrast, is a collection of gnomic wisdom or illustrative anecdotes and wise sayings. With the exception of a few stanzas which are found, whole or partially, in other Old Icelandic texts, it is preserved in a single manuscript only, *Konungsbók* (the *Codex Regius*), which was written in about 1270.³ This manuscript was kept in Denmark for many centuries, but was returned to Iceland in 1971.



Óðinn, chief of the Norse gods.

The High One (Icelandic: *Hávi*) is a name of Óðinn; *Hávámál* means ‘the Sayings of the High One’ and thus Óðinn is the ‘speaker.’ As the most powerful of the Norse gods, it is natural that he should be the one to give mankind the moral precepts it needs to live by. Óðinn gives advice, recounts anecdotes and describes his quest for knowledge and the difficulties and sacrifices that this cost him.⁴

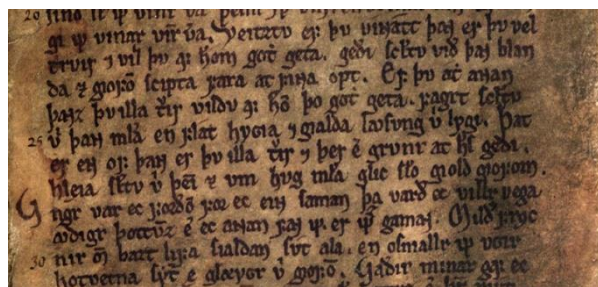
Hávámál is a fairly long poem, consisting of 164 stanzas, but it is not certain whether it existed as a single entity before it was written down in the *Codex Regius*; it can at least be seen that



The Codex Regius manuscript.

some attempts are made there to make it into a unified work. Generally, though, scholars agree that *Hávámál* is a compilation of several poems, whether this was made in the *Codex Regius* or earlier. The Swedish philologist Elias Wessén pointed out, in his article, *Athuganir á stíl Hávamála* (‘Studies on the Style of *Hávámál*’) that it evidently consists of several poems, related by their content and form, which some redactor combined under a single title. Amongst other things, this can be seen from the manuscript

itself, in which stanzas 111 and 138 begin with large capitals which evidently mark the beginning of new poems. A new section, sharply differentiated from what goes before it in terms of content and style, begins in stanza 146. This section is furthermore bound together by including a count: ‘The first is Help (146), ... A second I know (147), ... A third I know (148)’ and so on down to stanza 163; the closing stanza, 164, is probably a later addition made at the time when the poems were combined. Wessén saw the situation with the first section (stanzas 1-110) as being more complicated: stanzas 1-77 form the *Guests’ Section*, to which stanzas 76 and 77 are the conclusion, after which stanzas 78 to 110 form a separate poem.⁵



From the Codex Regius.

Scholars have not been in full agreement on the divisions of *Hávámál* into various sub-poems as described above and various other

² See, for example, Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘Inngangur’, ix.

³ Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘*Hávámál*,’ 22.

⁴ Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘*Hávámál*,’ 22.

⁵ Elias Wessén, ‘*Athuganir á stíl Hávamála*,’ 193-195.

arguments have been advanced. However, these need not concern us here.

Modern editions and analyses of *Hávámál* generally treat the poem as falling into five sections. The first is the *Guests' Section*, from the beginning to stanza 77, dealing with daily life, travel, hospitality and friendship; next (stanzas 78-110) comes the section *Dæmi Óðins*, consisting of maxims about love, from the male point of view. The third section, *Loddfáfnismál*, from stanza 111 to 137, contains pieces of advice addressed to Loddfáfnir. His identity is not known; he is probably a disciple of Óðinn, or could be Óðinn himself. Stanzas 138 to 145 are known as *Rúnatal* and describe how Óðinn acquired his wisdom. In the final, section *Ljóðatal*, which runs from stanza 146 to 164, Óðinn relates his skills in magic.⁶

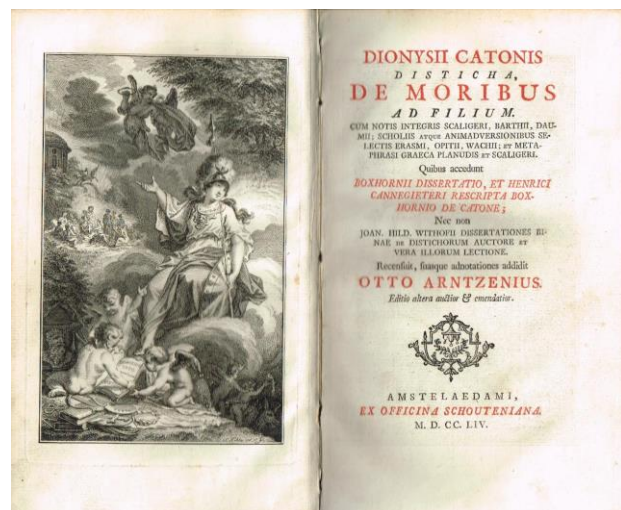
The roots of *Hávámál*

Various theories have been put forward about the origins of *Hávámál*. Scholars have sought to establish whether any trace of Christian influence can be identified in the text or whether the world-view is exclusively heathen. Other questions they have addressed is whether the poem should be regarded as Norwegian or Icelandic, and whether the text we have was influenced by the classical texts used in medieval education or by Christian rhetoric. It is very difficult to answer these questions conclusively.

For a long time, the generally accepted scholarly view was that this poem, or these poems, were composed in Norway during the Viking Age and that they are primarily pagan in character.⁷ Jón Helgason said, in his survey of Icelandic literature, that *Hávámál* contained no evidence of Christian influence and at the same time it contained no indication of any belief in the pagan gods or even in any form of fatalism. Whenever any particular qualities or actions are named, he said, they are viewed purely from the point of view of life here and now: there is no mention of reward or punishment after death.⁸ Thus, he argued, the poem was neither pagan nor Christian in any religious sense. However, the matter is not so simple, and later scholars have argued that *Hávámál* was, to a large extent, composed in Iceland and is moulded by Christian ideas and Latin scholarly works.

Hermann Pálsson's view was that *Hávámál* shows every sign of having been composed by a learned man who took its precepts and wisdom from all sorts of academic works that used to form the basis of education in the Middle Ages.⁹ Various other scholars have joined him in pointing out relationships between *Hávámál* and other ancient gnomic writings; the French Scandinavist Régis Boyer compared the poem with ancient Jewish scriptures and the German scholar Klaus von See investigated its connection with

Hugsvinnsmál, which is a reworking of the 3rd-century *Disticha Catonis*, a collection of proverbial



Disticha Catonis.

⁶ Gísli Sigurðsson, '*Hávámál*,' 22.

⁷ Cf. Finnur Jónsson, *Bókmenntasaga Íslendinga*, 66-70 and 80; Jón Helgason, *Litteraturhistorie*, 46.

⁸ Jón Helgason, *Litteraturhistorie*, 46.

⁹ Hermann Pálsson, *Heimur Hávamála*, 9.

wisdom in Latin which was used in Icelandic schools from the 11th century until after the Reformation.¹⁰

It must nevertheless be borne in mind that the poems that were yoked together to form *Hávámál* probably existed for a long time in oral tradition and would have undergone considerable changes before eventually being committed to parchment. Thus, it can be questionable to speak of particular authors of the poems, as it was not until they were recorded in written form that they assumed the fixed form that we know today. Similarly, it can be misleading to identify particular places where they were composed. In view of how different the poems are, in terms both of substance and presentation, it seems clear that they originated in various places and at various times.¹¹

There is no doubt that the authors of *Hávámál* made use of a wide variety of material. Some of the ideas in the poem may have been handed down from generation to generation (*gammel folkelig visdom* - ‘ancient folk wisdom’ - in Jón Helgason’s phrase)¹² while others grew out of the common experience or outlook of the Nordic world, with an admixture of poetical insight and imagination by the authors. Thus, a lot of the ideology expressed in *Hávámál* seems to have deep roots which can be traced to origins from far and wide.¹³

Hermann Pálsson also points out that *Hávámál* deals with various problems that were the subject of humanistic scholarship in the 12th century: neuroses, human nature, wisdom, solitude, friendship, the nature of life, etc. He argues that the fundamental ideas expressed in the poem indicate two main sources: the learning and breadth of vision of the 12th century, on the one hand, and Norse paganism on the other.¹⁴

Gísli Sigurðsson supports this view:

Hávámál is a mixture of all the learned ideas available in the ancient period, but it goes back, above all, to common human experience in the Norse heathen culture, and to original thinking – like all good poetry.¹⁵

It is perfectly natural that certain Christian ideas should turn up in a poem composed in the Nordic countries at this period. The border-line between paganism and Christianity was already somewhat blurred in the Viking Age¹⁶ and the Norsemen had long been mixed in their faith. Some of the countries to the south and west had accepted Christianity at early dates.¹⁷ One of the conclusions reached by Régis Boyer in his commentary is that the similarities between the Biblical book *Ecclesiastes* – attributed in some traditions to King Solomon – and the *Guests’ Section* of *Hávámál* are so close as to indicate a definite relationship between the two.¹⁸ It may be that the author of *Guests’ Section* borrowed material from *Ecclesiastes*, or that both are descended from a common model. In both, the emphasis is on caution, moderation and the importance of friendship. Both reflect on the impermanence of life: ‘all is vanity’ is a recurring statement in the Biblical work, while *Hávámál* points out that wealth, friendship and life itself are transient; this is summed up in the image *hverf er*

¹⁰ Cf. Boyer, *La Vie Religieuse en Islande 1116-1264: d’après la Sturlunga saga et les sagas des eveques*; von See, ‘Disticha Catonis, Hugsvinnmál und Hávamál’; von See, *Die Gestalt der Hávamál*.

¹¹ On this point, see, for example, Vésteinn Ólason, *Íslensk bókmenntasaga I*, 113-123.

¹² Jón Helgason, *Litteraturhistorie*, 43.

¹³ Tryggvi Gíslason, ‘Óðinn og Salómon’, 806; Sigurður Nordal, ‘Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar’, 152.

¹⁴ Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘*Hávámál*’, 22.

¹⁵ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Hávamál*, 22.

¹⁶ Einar Molland, ‘Trosskiftet’, 703.

¹⁷ For example, the populations of present-day France and Germany, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in Anglo-Saxon England and the Irish.

¹⁸ Cf. Boyer, *La Vie Religieuse en Islande 1116-1264: d’après la Sturlunga saga et les sagas des eveques*.

haustgríma, ‘changeable are autumn nights’.¹⁹ A comparison of these two works is interesting for a Freemason, as Solomon’s words are close to the Royal Art; this will be examined in further detail below.

The moral message of *Hávámál*

In *Hávámál*’s moral message, ‘the main emphasis is on the individual and the reputation he earns for himself. Wisdom, moderation and friendship are important for every man, as are courtesy and hospitality; wealth and power are fickle friends. At the end of the day, life itself is our best possession and no one is so devoid of talent or ability as to be completely useless.’²⁰

The main focus in the Guests’ Section of *Hávámál* is on everyday phenomena and the general problems encountered in human life, but without any direct discussion of religion. There is nothing here about Christianity as such, or about paganism. It could be said that the morality expressed in this part of the poem is more of the type that has directed people’s conduct both in Christian societies and in the heathen communities of the Viking Age – a morality of practical common sense. Nor is there anything in the poem about the responsibilities of blood ties which could reflect the Viking ethos; the speaker is alone in the world, without obligations towards society, except perhaps towards the friends he makes.²¹

In many ways, the moral message of *Hávámál* fits better with a man’s point of view and mentality than those of a woman. Advice given in the poem about relations between the sexes is always from the point of view of a man who is aiming at forming a relationship with women or retaining their love. To illustrate his point, Óðinn relates some examples of his own amorous adventures. He gives no advice to women on how to win the love of men. In fields other than love, the accent is also on men’s activities: drinking, felling trees, sailing, etc. Thus, the poem reflects the outlook of the dominant powers in the society in which it originated. All the same, we must not neglect what it offers about general human requirements: the search for wisdom, sociability, health, caution, moderation and earning a good reputation are things that apply to both sexes and to people from all walks of life.²²

In his BA-thesis in Philosophy at the University of Iceland, *Heimspeki Hávámála* (‘The Philosophy of Hávámál’), Óttar M. Norðfjörð discusses, amongst other things, the aim of the poem. This, he concludes, was to promulgate a particular life-style that would result in a life of contentment.²³ Contentment is the life. Happiness, according to the poem, is the aim of life. This does not mean pure joy, however – that being a transient emotional state – but rather a long-term, positive state of mind that is difficult to acquire and difficult to change. Contentment means a state of wholistic calm and happiness, and the author of *Hávámál* discusses four ideas that will lead to a contented life. These are: *common sense*, *independence*, *friendship* and *joy*. These four concepts appear regularly as targets to be aimed at by the individual; where they operate in concert, the individual’s spiritual state will be maintained in balance.²⁴

Óttar divides the concept of *contentment* into *external* and *internal* contentment. External contentment refers to the way the individual is seen by others and the external goods that one can

¹⁹ Tryggvi Gíslason, ‘Óðinn og Salómon’, 807.

²⁰ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Hávámál* 22.

²¹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Íslensk bókmenntasaga I*, 116.

²² Gísli Sigurðsson, *Hávámál* 22.

²³ ‘Happiness’ or ‘luck’ are alternative translations, but each calls for qualification, at least in prose, to prevent certain of their connotations from distorting the meaning intended. I therefore favour ‘contentment’ as the least misleading term. [Translator’s note.]

²⁴ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávámála*, 28-29.

acquire and that have a status vis-à-vis one's community. Here, it is important to control one's behaviour in company and not to damage one's reputation. Internal contentment, on the other hand, applies to the individual's spiritual life, peace of mind and happiness. In this context, the stanzas on friends and relatives and the author's concept of joy are important.²⁵

Óttar mentions that one of the key premises for contentment, according to *Hávámál*'s system of values, is 'sense' – common sense, sensible attitudes and actions – this concept being expressed in the adjective *snotur*, meaning 'sensible' or 'wise'. This is related to the goddess *Snotra*, who is mentioned in Snorri's *Edda* (the 'Prose Edda') as being 'wise, courteous and moderate'. These qualities are therefore involved in being *snotur* or 'sensible' and consequently they are necessary for being content and having a contented life according to the poem.²⁶



The Norse goddess Snotra.

Another key to contentment is independence of action. The value of independence of action is best seen in the fact that the whole poem is tailored to free, equal individuals. Thus, it is assumed that the person who is to learn from the poem is in control of his own affairs, and stanzas 8 and 9 state clearly that independence is a prerequisite for contentment.²⁷

Óttar regards friends and relations as the third precondition for achieving contentment in *Hávámál*. They are mentioned in many contexts, from personal verses on their importance to cynical verses on making use of them. *Hávámál* discusses not only friends and relations but also enemies and the evil they bring.²⁸

Óttar identifies joy in life as the last key to contentment. This depends on the right use of one's wits, or intelligence, and on love of life. By making a connection between the right use of one's wits and joy in life, the author of *Hávámál* reveals his opinion that joy is to a large extent dependent on intelligence, on whether we perceive our environment correctly and whether we choose interests or activities in life that will not be likely to undermine our enjoyment of it. The poem recommends being cheerful for as long as one lives; no matter the circumstances, things could always be worse – amongst other things, one could be dead. *Glaður og reifur / skyli gumna hver / uns sinn bíður bana* ('cheerful and merry every man should be until he comes to death').²⁹

According to these four basic principles in the conceptual system of *Hávámál*, the person who is sensible, independent, who has friends and relations and who enjoys life is likely to be content with his lot.

Óttar Norðfjörð and other scholars who have examined the moral message of *Hávámál*, and specifically of the *Guests' Section*, are mostly in agreement that the core of the poem is that by conducting oneself in a certain way, both in one's relationships with others and with oneself, it is possible to achieve happiness and a more purposeful and fuller life – i.e., contentment. This, of course, has also been the core of the morality of various groups through the ages – often taking higher powers into account³⁰ – including the Freemasons.

²⁵ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 29-33.

²⁶ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 33-55.

²⁷ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 55-58.

²⁸ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 58-67.

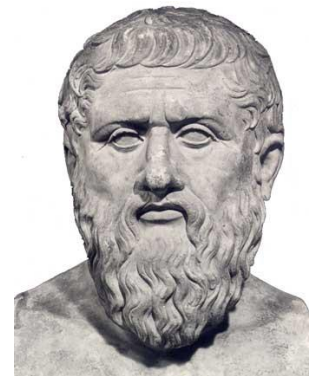
²⁹ Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 67-72.

³⁰ Cf., for example, the ideas regarding the justification of work in the Catholic belief system and in various other Christian denominations, i.e. that one must deliberately do deeds of charity and religious observance in order to be regarded as just and qualify for salvation.

The Virtues

Virtues form the foundation of people's moral conduct, and of their good moral qualities and their personal characters and talents. Ideas about such virtues, or personal moral qualities, can be traced far back in time. Ancient Greece is where definite ideas about what we generally term 'virtues' were first formulated.

Plato (427-347 BC) argued that the course of action that was most likely to bring prosperity to a man was to acquire knowledge of the original form of 'the good'. Because they are enmeshed in the material world, he argued, men can only approach the good, but through the attempt, they will become more capable of doing good. Plato believed that the virtues were part of knowledge, and knowledge of the original form of the good was a precondition for good conduct. Evil, on the other hand, and consequently vices, proceeded from ignorance. Plato considered *wisdom*, *courage* and *moderation* to be the foundation of the cardinal virtue, *justice*. By practising these virtues, men had a chance of acquiring happiness. These ideas were, amongst other things, the basis of Plato's ideas about a model state. His work on this subject, *The Republic*, had an immense influence on philosophy and other scholarly enquiries in Western culture for many centuries.³¹



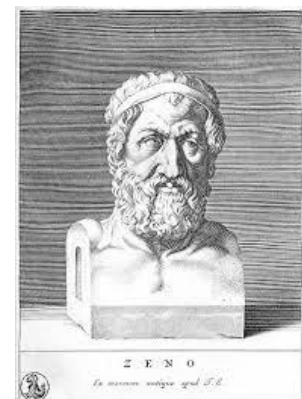
Plato.



Aristotle.

Plato's pupil Aristotle (384-322 BC) considered that good morality resided in the individual and expressed itself primarily in his interaction with others. He saw wisdom as the core of the good in men; it was needed in order to find the golden mean between two extremes, which in fact were vices. For example, the golden mean between recklessness and cowardice was courage; a sense of honour was the mean between vaingloriousness and indifference, and generosity was the mean between excess and miserliness. Aristotle taught that the most important thing was to be in control of one's emotions at the right time, in the right place and towards the right individuals, in the right circumstances and in the right manner. By following the golden mean in this way, one could practise the virtuous life.³²

To the Stoics, virtue was the only important thing in life. The supreme moral precept was to live in harmony with nature, in accordance with man's rational nature, which was part of universal nature or the universal order of things. As only what was in harmony with every being's innermost nature could be considered good, virtue was equated with happiness and was seen as equivalent to the supreme good. The opposite of virtue was evil; the choice between virtue and vice lay within the powers of the individual. The Stoic school of philosophy was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium (333-264 BC) in about 300 BC, the name 'Stoic' being derived from *Stoa Poikile*, the 'Painted Portico' where Zeno taught. The Stoics divided philosophy into three parts: logic, physics and morality. Stoicism, as a philosophical tradition, lasted until the 2nd century AD and was a serious rival of Christianity.³³



Zeno of Citium.

³¹ Ólafur Jens Pétursson, *Hugmyndasaga*, 45-49.

³² Ólafur Jens Pétursson, *Hugmyndasaga*, 59.

³³ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Hugmyndasaga: Frá sögnum til siðskipta*, 99-100; see also Gunnar Dal: *Grískir heimspekingar*, 202-212.

Thus, ideas developed gradually among the Ancient Greeks about the virtues and their influence for the good on human behaviour. Generally, the Greeks recognised four cardinal virtues: *prudence* (or *wisdom*), *fortitude* (or *courage*), *temperance* (or *moderation*) and *justice*. These were later subsumed into Christianity, which regarded them as *natural virtues*, which occurred naturally in man, to which it added *faith*, *hope* and *charity*, which were seen as coming from God.³⁴ Against the cardinal virtues stand the cardinal or deadly sins, which were seen as conscious violations of God's will: *pride*, *gluttony*, *lust*, *envy*, *excess*, *wrath* and *sloth*.³⁵



Faith, Hope and Charity.

I do not propose to trace these historical developments further here, but this is the ancient stock of categories and concepts regarding virtues and moral goodness on which Christianity, and the Masonic order, draw their notions about morality in part.

Masonic ethics

The Masonic Order attaches priority mainly to the practice of virtues; brethren are reminded of this at each I° meeting and in other contexts. Every Swedish Rite Mason is obliged to pursue and practise silence, prudence, temperance and charity. Swedish Rite Masonry also includes a further three: fortitude, industriousness, and justice – thus, Masons recognise seven cardinal virtues. As can be seen, the virtues are framed slightly differently in the Swedish Rite compared to other Masonic Rites.

Nevertheless, the moral teaching of the Masonic order is unclear in many respects and, like so much else that it presents to the brethren, sometimes calls for interpretation. In many places, however, brethren are urged to adopt a particular moral discipline in the order's tenets. Nevertheless, certain basic principles are clear and obvious. These are set forth in the Constitution of the order. Belief in



The Masonic Hall in Reykjavík.

God, the Supreme Being, is the beginning and the centrepiece of the order.³⁶ In other words, the Masonic Order is based on a Christian foundation and 'traces its origin and ideals back to the brotherhoods, or guilds, that were established in ancient times in honour of God, the Supreme Being.'³⁷ The order sets itself the goal of improving and ennobling human life

... 'to promote goodwill and honour among all men and to increase their sense of brotherhood'. It aims 'to inform the brethren of the noble art of promoting virtue, suppressing vices and so enhancing the best parts of their character ...'.³⁸ It is stated that wisdom has set up the seven cornerstones on which the Temple stands: belief in God, virtue, charity, sincerity, silence, industriousness and fortitude. Faith is the core of the order; virtue is the building material, charity creates internal beauty and compassion;

³⁴ *Íslenska alfræðiorðabókin II*, 136.

³⁵ *Íslenska alfræðiorðabókin I*, 282; Gunnar Hersveinn, *Orðspor*, 158-161.

³⁶ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 1.

³⁷ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 1.

³⁸ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 1.

sincerity strengthens the order; silence preserves its secrets; industriousness advances its work and fortitude ensues its independence.³⁹ This is the core of the Royal Art of Swedish Rite Masonry.

Chapter 2 of the Constitution states the obligations of the brethren. Each brother is required to develop his faith. He is also ‘to endure trials with fortitude and constancy and to show humility and modesty in prosperity...’⁴⁰ Furthermore, each brother is to strive to be a reliable and law-abiding citizen and to show obedience to the order. He shall be industrious, practise application and discharge his work within the order diligently. Charity, helpfulness, goodwill, honour, justice, keeping one’s word and modesty are to be the characteristics of the brethren’s conduct. Furthermore, they are to be obliging and considerate, helping those in need, visiting the sick, comforting the sorrowful, encouraging the downcast and guiding those who fall by the wayside.⁴¹

The obligations that each brother has towards himself are to seek illumination and truth, to ennoble his thinking, refine his conduct, avoid vices and strive to achieve maturity and improvement. He is to be careful in speech, keep his word, be candid, respectable and moderate.⁴² The Constitution lays down that Masons are not to fear death, knowing that life is a gift from God for which they are to be grateful, protecting it as a blessing to themselves, their families and the community.⁴³

Common moral ground

Let us now consider the message set out in the first part of *Hávámál* and compare it with the morality of the Masons.

The *Guests’ Section*, the first section of *Hávámál*, spanning stanzas 1-77, lays down rules and advice on conduct in daily life. This is poetry laced with deep wisdom, and the virtues feature prominently.

On prudence

Straight away in the first stanza, we are urged to observe prudence, to be on our guard in unfamiliar circumstances. An unknown guest arrives. He is advised to show the greatest care, as there could be enemies in this unknown place. The first stanza presents a picture of a dangerous society where dangers may lurk at every turn. This idea is repeated in various forms in the poem, but this is how the first stanza puts it.

1.
All the doorways, before one enters,
should be looked around,
should be spied out;
it can’t be known for certain where enemies are sitting
in the hall ahead.⁴⁴

Stanza 38 says much the same thing. It urges the reader or hearer to show prudence in everything and never to leave one’s weapons out of reach, as there is no knowing when they will be needed.

³⁹ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 3.

⁴¹ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 5.

⁴² *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 5.

⁴³ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 6.

⁴⁴ Quotations from *Hávámál* are given here in the English translation by Carolyne Larrington: *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford World’s Classics, Revised Edition 2014.

38.

From his weapons on open land
No man should step one pace away;
For it can't be known for certain, out on the road,
When a man might have need of his spear.

But it is more than armed enemies that one must guard against: it is also important for every man to be independent in the use of his mind; to trust his own judgment and beware of false advice of others. Masons are encouraged to take the view that they are free individuals who are to trust in their judgment – their conscience and reasoning.

9.

He's lucky, the man who keeps in himself
praise and wit while he lives;
for bad advice men have often received
from another's breast.

Stanza 24 warns against being too trusting.

24.

The foolish man thinks that everyone
is his friend who laughs with him;
he doesn't notice though they say nasty things about him
when he sits among the wise.

Stanza 73 returns to the need to be guarded and suspicious in all dealings and to have reservations about what others say. In the first line, 'two are destroyers of one' may be understood as meaning that two can overpower one. 'Hidden under every fur coat I expect to find a hand' means: I expect a (hostile) hand to emerge from under every coat.

73.

Two are destroyers of one, the tongue is the head's slayer,
hidden under every fur coat I expect to find a hand.

On silence

Practising **silence** does not mean either remaining silent in general and never saying more than is strictly necessary, but rather being careful about what one says and not divulging things that have been told to one in confidence. The Masonic order imposes on its members the duty of not disclosing its secrets; it also expects them not to say things that are groundless or to spread rumours about other people.

Silence also involves listening to others. It is no coincidence that the Creator gave us two eyes and two ears but only one mouth: it is better for us to listen and look more than we speak. Solomon says, in *Proverbs* 13:3, 'He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction'; *Ecclesiastes* 5:1 reads: 'Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil'. Thus, it is often better to have sense and conscience in control rather than to say something unguarded.

The author of *Guests' Section* is basically of the same opinion:

7.

The careful guest, who comes to a meal,
keeps silent, with hearing finely attuned;
he listens with his ears, and looks about with his eyes,
so every wise man spies out what's ahead.

When one is invited to a feast, it is wise to be quiet and listen intently and look around carefully before speaking oneself. There is less danger of blurting something out that should have been left unsaid.

Silence also gives one the opportunity to take stock and understand what other people are saying and, at the same time, letting the other person talk as he or she wants to. The *Guests' Section* frequently touches on the art of knowing when to keep silent; it can often be the best policy for those who are less than exceptionally bright.

27.

The foolish man in company
does best if he stays silent;
no one will know that he knows nothing
unless he talks too much;
but the man who knows nothing does not know
even if he is talking too much.

The fool will not reveal his foolishness if he remains silent. In any case, as he is not capable of knowing when he talks too much, it is best for him not to talk at all.

This is in keeping with what *Ecclesiastes* says (10:12-14): 'The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of this mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also is full of words'.

28.

Wise he esteems himself who knows [how to gather news]⁴⁵
and how [to pass it on];
the sons of men cannot keep secret
what's going around about folk.

This stanza may contain a double meaning. The man who knows how to gather news and how to pass it on esteems himself wise. But is he really wise – perhaps he is simply a gossip-spreader? Are all the stories in circulation about people true? Or is there always some truth in them somewhere? More advice in this vein follows:

29.

Quite enough baseless blather comes
from the man never silent;

⁴⁵ The words in brackets in this stanza are the present translator's interpretation and differ from the text of the Carolyne Larrington's translation acknowledged above.

a quick tongue, unless it's held in check,
often talks itself into trouble.

Someone who talks constantly says a lot that is nonsense. Even though people speak well and fluently, they may have reason to regret it unless they know how to control their tongues.

It is also necessary to know how to keep a secret.

63.
Asking and answering every wise man should do,
he who wants to be reputed intelligent;
one shall know, a second shall not,
the whole world knows, if three know.

Wisdom can be acquired by gathering and relating news, but one should keep secrets to oneself – because once three people know them, then the whole world knows.

Stanza 65 stresses yet again the importance of controlling what one says; failure to do this can have consequences.

65.
For those words which one man says to another,
often he gets paid back.

On temperance

How does the author of *The Guests' Section* regard **temperance**?

The wise man does not boast about his wisdom; he is careful about speaking his mind in an unfamiliar environment. Cautious people seldom make mistakes; wit – i.e. sensible thinking or judgment – is the friend that is least likely to let one down in life.

6.
About his intelligence no man should be boastful,
rather cautious of mind;
when a wise and silent man comes to a homestead
blame seldom befalls the wary;
for no more dependable friend can a man ever get
than a store of common sense.

The Constitution of the Masonic Order defines as one of the obligations of the brethren to show humility and modesty in prosperity; this is one of the things that is to characterise their conduct.⁴⁶

Temperance manifests itself in many ways. The *Guests' Section* calls for moderation in eating and drinking. A tendency to over-indulge in drink is not a good quality; it results in loss of temper and loss of clear thinking: drinking can be dangerous. The more men drink, the stupider they become.

11.
No better burden a man bears on the road
than a store of common sense;

⁴⁶ *Frímúrarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók, 3.*

no worse journey-provision could he carry over the plain
than over-much drinking of ale.

12.

It isn't as good as it's said to be,
ale, for the sons of men;
for the more a man drinks, the less he knows
about his own mind.

Things are even worse when a fool, who does not know how to behave in other people's homes, gets a drink inside him: *in vino veritas*, and his true character is revealed:

17.

The fool stares when he comes on a visit,
he mutters to himself or hovers about;
but it's all up with him if he gets a swig of drink;
the man's mind is exposed.

The fool stares when he arrives at a feast, and either talks constantly or is silent.
Furthermore:

19.

Let no man hold onto the cup, but drink
mead in moderation;
let him say what's necessary or be silent;
no man will scold you
because you go off early to bed.

The advice here is to pass the drinking-cup on, drinking only in moderation. Nor is it rude to the company to leave the party early and go and sleep, even if the hour is not late.

It is not only in drinking that moderation is to be observed, but also in eating. The fool's belly is often the butt of jokes among the wise.

20.

The greedy man, unless he guards against this tendency,
will eat himself into lifelong trouble;
often when he comes among the wise,
the foolish man's stomach is laughed at.

So, moderation in eating and drinking is important, though at the same time, *Hávámál* emphasizes the value of celebrating in good company: man is man's delight. Further examples could be given where moderation is prescribed regarding worldly goods: it is often found better than greed and acquisitiveness.

On charity

Stanzas 3 and 4 speak of guests' basic needs and the duties of the host. Physical needs come first; after that, his need for social contact must be met by speaking to him and listening to him when he replies.

In this, consideration must be shown to those who are not rich or in strong social positions; this involves **charity**.

3.

Fire is needful for someone who's come in
and who's chilled to the knee;
food and clothing are necessary for the man
who's journeyed over the mountains.

4.

Water is needful for someone who comes to a meal,
a towel and a warm welcome,
a friendly disposition, if he could get it,
speech and silence in return.

Consideration for other people's feelings is another aspect of charity, no one's misfortunes should be made fun of.

30.

Into a laughing-stock no man should make another,
if he comes to visit the household.

Other virtues

Hávámál honours other qualities and virtues apart from the four cardinal virtues. Many things in the poem call to mind the Mason's quest for enlightenment and truth, for example the **search for wisdom, friendship, sincerity, justice, fortitude, loyalty, industriousness** and the value of being **independent** and **free**. Men are encouraged to practise **self-criticism** and **tolerance** and to maintain a **calm and untroubled outlook** regarding death. It is also important not to indulge in **needless worrying**; it solves no problems. It is better to look on the **bright side** of life, to be **healthy** and to live a **blameless** life as far as possible. This is the basis of the good life.

Let us consider further examples. Stanza 5 deals, for example, with intelligence and knowledge. The idea is that one can acquire wisdom and knowledge by travelling; it will put one's abilities to the test, while the man who stays at home learns little because he never has to use his understanding or knowledge. This is a point of view that Masons are familiar with.

5.

Wits are needful for someone who wanders widely,
anything will pass at home;
he becomes a laughing-stock, the man who knows nothing
and sits among the wise.

Stanza 18 says that one who travels will learn much through meeting many people. He will become a judge of each man's character and intelligence.

18.

Only that man who wanders widely
and has journeyed a great deal knows
what sort of mind each man controls;

he who's sharp in his wits.

Stanzas 54-56 cover knowledge – wisdom and joy of life. Though it is good to be wise, as has often been stated, it is not good for any individual to know everything, and particularly not concerning his own fate. To enjoy everything life has to offer, it is therefore best to be only moderately wise.

The same viewpoint is expressed in *Ecclesiastes*. Both works praise wisdom, but point out that it has its disadvantages too. As the Preacher puts it: 'For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (1:18); 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.' (7:4) and '... a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment' (8:5).⁴⁷

54.

Averagely wise a man ought to be,
never too wise;
for those men have the best sort of life
who know a fair amount.

55.

Averagely wise a man ought to be,
never too wise;
for a wise man's heart is seldom cheerful,
if he who owns it's too wise.

56.

Averagely wise a man ought to be,
never too wise;
let no one know his fate beforehand,
for he'll have the most carefree spirit.

Stanzas 58 and 59 stress that time is valuable and is to be used well. Industriousness and hard work pay off: the early bird catches the worm. In the same way, Masons are urged to be industrious, to apply themselves fully to what they do and to carry out their work for the Order diligently. It is also pointed out to them that time is limited.⁴⁸ 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom,' runs *Psalms* 90:12, and *Ecclesiastes* 3:1 says: 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.'

58.

He should get up early, the man who means to take
another's life or property;
seldom does the loafing wolf snatch the ham,
nor a sleeping man victory.

59.

He should get up early, the man who has few workers,

⁴⁷ In this context it may be recalled that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) expressed the same idea regarding moral philosophy, i.e. that the morally correct life often involved unhappiness because an enlightened life-style often demands conduct that is at variance with man's natural instincts and quest for happiness.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Frimurarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók.*

and set about his work with thought;
much gets held up for the man sleeping in in the morning;
wealth is half-won by activity.

34.
It's a great detour to a bad friend's house,
even though he lives on the route;
but to a good friend's house the ways lie straight,
even though he lives far off.

On friendship

The author of the *Guests' Section* attaches great importance to friendship and the necessity of cultivating it. This, too, harmonises with the guiding principles of Freemasonry. It always seems far to go to a bad friend, even though he lives on the main road; by contrast, the way to a good friend seems direct even if the distance is greater.

Stanzas 41 to 46 deal with various aspects of friendship. One should be a friend to one's friend; gifts between friends can enhance a friendship and maintain it. One should visit one's friends as often as possible and share one's thoughts and worries with them. Friendship will develop and deepen over time, but a passionate friendship often burns itself out quickly.

41.
With weapons and gifts friends should gladden one another,
those which can be seen on them;
mutual givers and receivers are friends for longest,
if the friendship keeps going well.

Gifts can enhance a friendship and maintain it.

42.
To his friend a man should be a friend
and repay gifts with gifts;
laughter men should accept with laughter
but return deception for a lie.

This stanza touches on how friendship should be cultivated, but also recommends that falsehood should be repaid in the same coin. Obviously this is at variance with the Christian principle of loving one's enemies; it is also incompatible with Masonic notions of ethical behaviour. Masons are at all times to bear in mind the Biblical Golden Rule: 'Therefore in all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them' (Matthew 7:12). Helpfulness and goodwill are also supposed to be characteristics of Masonic conduct.⁴⁹

43.
To his friend a man should be a friend

⁴⁹ Cf. *Frímurarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 5.

and to his friend's friend too;
but no man should be a friend
to the friend of his enemy.

One should be the friend of one's friends and of their friends, but not of the friend of one's enemy.

44.

You know, if you've a friend whom you really trust
and from whom you want nothing but good,
you should mix your soul with his and exchange gifts,
go and see him often.

Friendship is based on sincerity and one should visit one's friends as often as possible, sharing joys and sorrows with them and exchanging gifts.

The next two stanzas deal with mistrust and deception; they sound a warning. But the idea of retribution presented in these stanzas contradicts Masonic notions of ethical behaviour as has already been mentioned.

45.

If you've another, whom you don't trust,
but from whom you want nothing but good,
speak fairly to him, but think falsely
and repay treachery with a lie.

46.

Again, concerning the one you don't trust,
and whose mind you suspect:
you should laugh with him and disguise your thoughts:
a gift should be repaid with a like one.

On life and death

Stanza 68 describes by means of an image the fire that is best in human life. The most valuable thing is to see the sun and cultivate optimism, and to be healthy and live an upright life.

68.

Fire is best for the sons of men,
and the light of the sun
his health, if a man can manage it,
living without disgrace.

'Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun' says the Preacher, and continues: 'But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many' (*Ecclesiastes* 11:7-8).

On the other hand, even though one should be silent and learn to observe closely, one should be cheerful and enjoy life right to the end.

15.

Silent and thoughtful a prince's son should be
and bold in fighting;
cheerful and merry every man should be
until he comes to death.

What is important is to enjoy life while it lasts and be bold in fighting until the last moment.

On the other hand, 'a Mason ... is not afraid of death, knowing that life is a gift from God for which He should be thanked; it should be protected ...'.⁵⁰ Thus, Masons are urged to look death in the eye, acknowledge its existence without fear and ponder on the fate that awaits us all. The author of the *Guests' Section* also recognises the inevitability of death and the fact that everyone, high and low, will have to face it at the end. 'For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other ...' (*Ecclesiastes*, 3:19).

76.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die;
but the glory of reputation never dies,
for the man who can get himself a good one.

77.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
the reputation of each dead man.

The main aim of the moral message of the *Guests' Section* of *Hávámál* is, as has been said above, to teach that a man may, through his conduct, achieve contentment, i.e. become a sensible and good person – and live a full and pleasing life. If he achieves this goal, his good reputation will survive him after death: he will be recalled in praiseworthy terms and his life will be a model for others. In many ways this chimes with the aim of the Masonic Order, as can be seen in its Constitution: 'The aim of the Order is to ennoble and improve life. The Order aims to enhance goodwill and honourable conduct among all men and increase the sense of brotherhood among them'.⁵¹

One thing is certain: contentment, according to the author of the *Guests' Section*, is not something that can be achieved through a temporary, transient emotional state, but through long-term, positive spiritual activity which can be difficult to acquire and difficult to change – we in the Order are aware of this too.

Stanzas 76 and 77 bring the *Guests' Section* of *Hávámál* to a close. Later in the poem there is advice on how to conduct oneself when drinking and when seducing women. So far, the Order has not issued guidelines on things like that, as far as the author knows, though perhaps they might be found somewhere in dust-covered volumes in the libraries of the Royal Art.

Closing remarks

⁵⁰ *Frímurarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 6.

⁵¹ *Cf. Frímurarareglan á Íslandi. Grundvallarskipan: Fyrsta bók*, 1.

It has been found that the ancient moral message in the *Guests' Section* of *Hávamál* is, in many ways, in harmony with the ethical ideas and moral message in Masonic teachings; the foundations and the relationship between the two is probably closer and deeper than has generally been recognised.

The Masonic Order sets itself the aim of improving and ennobling mankind, promoting goodwill and honour among all men and increasing their sense of brotherhood. It aims to promote virtue and suppress vice, and so revealing the best parts of their character. In many respects, this is also the main aim of the author of the *Guests' Section*.

The four cardinal virtues of the Swedish Rite Masons – silence, prudence, temperance and charity, are clearly part of what is required, in the opinion of the author of the *Guests' Section*, for being able to cultivate ethical behaviour. He identifies various other qualities as promoting the maturity of the individual and the ennoblement of human life. These include wisdom or rational behaviour, friendship, a desire for knowledge, sincerity, fortitude, justice, loyalty, industriousness and the value of being free and independent. It is good, in his view, to apply self-criticism and tolerance and to be calm and resigned regarding death; to be optimistic, not to indulge in unnecessary worries and to live a healthy and respectable life. All of these points are also found in the ethical code of the Masons.

The main features that distinguish between the moral viewpoints of the two systems are 1) a belief in God, which Masons regard as the cornerstone of the Masonic Order, and 2) the calls for revenge that appear in *Hávamál* but which are opposed by the Masonic Order. The ethical principles and standards of conduct presented by the author of the *Guests' Section* apply first and foremost to this life and draw not on any religious belief but rather on human nature and the lessons of experience. The best course of action is to follow the promptings of rationality and conscience – which is what the Masons are also encouraged to do. Masons, on the other hand have a world-view that includes an afterlife. After this life, they will return to the eternal East for a new beginning; in this context, their conduct during this life will be important.

All the indications are that *Hávamál* was composed of sections of various age which were probably not assembled until the poem was committed to parchment in the 13th century. The material in the *Guests' Section* had probably been preserved in many different variants in oral tradition, some of them old and some of them of recent origin, before the poem was written down. Thus, the ideas expressed in the text combine pagan and Christian elements. In all likelihood, the person who recorded this part of the poem was a learned man of the 13th century; the recorder of *Hávamál* as a whole as a single poem may have been someone else.⁵²

To judge by the ethical principles and moral ideas set forth, the unknown writer of the *Guests' Section* of *Hávamál* would most definitely have been well regarded in any company of Masons.

...may he benefit, he who learnt it,
luck to those who listened!

⁵² Cf. Vésteinn Ólason, *Íslensk bokmenntasaga I*, 123; Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Heimspeki Hávamála*, 18.



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