

"...AND DEDICATED TO THE HOLY SAINTS JOHN"

-- An inquiry into the designation of the Saints John
as Patron Saints of Freemasonry

by W.B. Harvey L. Ward Jr. PM



One of the primary purposes of Freemasonry is the education of its members. Unfortunately, as the pressures of time and business conspire to constrain the intellectual activity of our Lodges, real Masonic education and inquiry are among the first pursuits to be jettisoned from our regular agendas. Education and reflection on Masonic issues used to be much more of a central part of the business a Masonic Lodge than it is today. Too often we become what

Brother Mackey referred to as “parrot Masons” - Masons who become quite proficient at learning words and directions but who give little or no attention to the philosophy behind those words.

It is proper then that as we celebrate the feast day of St. John the Baptist, we pause a few minutes to consider the history and background of this celebration.

As Masons we are all familiar with the phrase “Erected to God and dedicated to the Holy Saints John.” All of our Blue Lodges are so dedicated, yet we never hear any other information regarding these “Holy Saints John” or anything to explain why we refer to them as the Patron Saints of Freemasonry.

They are referenced in the Entered Apprentice Lecture as being “perfect parallels in Masonry as well as in Christianity.” It is almost an afterthought of a reference, given that we dedicate every Lodge to these two men. Who were these Saints John? Why are they important to us as Freemasons?

In early Masonry, the feast day of St. John the Baptist was always celebrated by the Craft. In fact, the first public Grand Lodge - the Grand Lodge of England - was born on St. John the Baptist’s day, June 24, in 1717 in London. Thereafter, the

Grand Lodge of England sponsored great annual celebrations of this day for many years. Eventually the feast of St. John the Evangelist became important as well and many Lodges and Grand Lodges moved the beginning of their Masonic year from June 24 to December 27. We can only assume that the proximity of December 27 to the beginning of the calendar year made it expedient to do so.

The festival days were of central importance to early American Lodges as well. Both feast days were almost always celebrated by all well-governed early Lodges. Our records indicate that Brothers George Washington and Benjamin Franklin always made it a point to attend their Lodges respective observances of St. Johns Days.

Elections and installations were usually planned around these dates. Even though we have allowed this tradition (like so many) to slip away, we retain the vestiges of it. You will notice that here in Florida our Masonic year begins “as close as possible” to December 27 according to the Digest of Masonic Law. The Grand Lodge year and annual communication are always scheduled in close proximity to June 24.

We always run the danger of allowing traditions to become habits and losing sight of the reason for the original tradition.

Today we celebrate the festival, or feast day of St. John the Baptist. Who was Saint John the Baptist?

The four Gospels, the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as found in the Bible’s New Testament, all describe this man in almost exactly the same language. The Baptist, who was a cousin to Jesus Christ, is spoken of as “A voice crying in the wilderness,” whose purpose was to, “Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight.” He must indeed have been an important man for all four Gospels to refer to him with exactly the same terminology, as this is extremely rare. In the Gospel of Luke, in fact, Jesus himself says of John, “Among them that are born of women, there has not risen any greater than John the Baptist.”

High praise indeed. It becomes more clear why we as Masons should hold him in such esteem. John the Baptist - called the Baptist because as he preached he baptized believers in the River Jordan - lived a simple, yet powerful and devout life. He preached single-minded righteous living and change of character. His message was that one must live in a holy manner and that deviation from that manner was not acceptable.

For his refusal to change himself or his message and for his devotion to Jesus, John the Baptist was imprisoned and eventually beheaded by King Herod. The heroism, fidelity and integrity of John are echoed in the legends of Jacques DeMolay and Hiram Abiff, which gives us more insight into his choice as a Patron Saint of the Masonic Order.

Certainly Saint John the Evangelist is important to us as Masons as well. It is fitting that while we have a relatively concrete biography of St. John the Baptist, whose theology and teachings were straightforward and rigid, the story of the Evangelist is more difficult to relate and requires more study much like his teachings. Saint John the Evangelist is likely the amalgamation of several New Testament Johns, including John the Disciple of Christ, John the Epistle writer and John the Divine of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation. There are many striking reasons why Freemasons would choose the Evangelist as Patron. Chiefly, the writings of this John (or group of Johns) read almost like Masonic ritual. The Gospel of John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and darkness comprehended it not.

Nowhere else in the Bible since the beginning of Genesis - familiar to all Freemasons - is the concept of light so inextricably entwined with the idea of the divine spirit. As we progress through higher degrees the concept of the Word, the Light and the Divine as inseparable parts of the whole of Creation becomes of primary importance. John the Evangelist leads us forward in that direction.

In his Epistles, the Evangelist continues to work from the theme that the Word and the Light are inevitably linked and goes on to bring Truth and Love in as links of the same chain. The idea and practice of Brotherly Love and Fellowship is explored more thoroughly by the Evangelist than by any other New Testament writer. The disturbing imagery of the Book of Revelations is the source of many esoteric schools of thought and many writers have made convincing arguments that this imagery is in many ways influential to Masonry.

Also of Masonic importance is that John the Evangelist is described as among the most loyal of the Disciples of Christ and the one closest to Jesus. Even in death, Jesus entrusts the care of his Mother to John, who we may assume was in many ways his best friend on earth.

There we have two Saints John, very properly described Masonically as parallel figures. Both of unimpeachable character and strong influence on the Western Mind, but one dogmatic and rigid, and the other intellectual and esoteric. In both we find the integrity and inflexible fidelity so common to Masonic teaching, but the manner of teaching those virtues varies between the two.

It is fitting that they represent these parallel lines of which we speak. But why them? Why have they always been linked to the Fraternity? Surely Masonry as we know it was not extant in the early Christian era, yet there is no period in Masonry where they do not appear.

In Masonic research on the topic of the Saints John we can be sure of only one thing - the concept of dedication of Lodges to them is indeed "time immemorial." The earliest Masonic documents speak of the Saints and of "The Lodge of the Saints John at Jerusalem."

Craft Masonry and Blue Lodges as we know them have received the care of the Saints John as Patrons as something of an heirloom from previous centuries. Lodges of "St. Johns' Masonry" existed long before 1717. Which brings us to the question of whence comes our Masonry. Interestingly, all three traditions of the most common theories of time immemorial Masonic origins have their own relationship with the Saints John.

There is a school of Masonic research holding that the Fraternity is descended from the Druids and other truly ancient Celtic priesthoods of the sun. Implausible as this theory is, it has a direct correlation to the veneration of the Saints John. Although entirely pagan and pre-Christian, these sun priests claimed as their holiest days the summer and winter solstices - the day when the sun shines the most and the day when it shines the least. As this was common among many pagan theologies, the early and medieval Christian Church adopted the solstices as important feast days and simply renamed them for two of the most important saints. The summer solstice was officially fixed to June 24 and dedicated to St. John the Baptist and the winter solstice was fixed to December 27 and dedicated to St. John the Evangelist.

Some say the old pagan traditions live on in Masonry's celebration of these days. If there is truth in that statement, it is because we celebrate the solstices as an embodiment of the Masonic ideals of regularity, constancy and order. As Freemasons we naturally work toward order and against irregularity and chaos. Only when a Masonic Lodge conforms to basic orderly usages and customs do we term it a "regular" Lodge and consider it worthy of communication. What better example of order and regularity than these diurnal solstices when the sun inevitably "dies" and is "reborn?" As the early Church saw wisdom in adopting these pagan symbols, perhaps it is not such a leap of faith to see them as Masonic Symbols as well.

In recent years the long-held belief that modern Masonry evolved from Medieval Stonemason Guilds has come under much questioning. Regardless of these questions, we find a relationship with the Saints John from this theory as well.

Of course, all medieval guilds adopted Patron Saints and used their feast days as central gatherings for celebration and also for choosing leaders and other necessary business matters. Stonemason Guilds, most notably in northern England and Scotland, often chose one or both of the Saints Johns as their Patrons. This was not necessarily true on the European continent or in Norman-

dominated southern England. The Freemasonry we practice here today, however, came primarily from northern England and Scotland - where the Saints John were common among the Stonemason Guilds.

An old theory of Masonic genesis that is slowly gaining returned momentum is the hypothesis that our Freemasonry evolved from the knightly orders of the Crusades. Specifically named are the Knights Templar and to a lesser extent the Knights Hospitaller. It is important to note here that the Hospitallers were (and are still today) more properly known as the Knights of St. John. The Saints John are also commonly referred to in Templar records and we know their festival days were of importance to the Templars. When the Templars were suppressed in 1307 most of their property, especially in England, became the property of the Hospitallers. Many Knights Templar in that area joined the Hospitallers following the suppression as well.

Also important in this inquiry is that one of the charges of “heresy” brought against the Templars was that they had become followers of Gnostic Christianity and had in many ways left behind the more traditional Roman Catholic interpretations. This is important in a discussion of the Saints John because the basis of much Gnostic thought is the Gospel and Epistles of John the Evangelist. In effect, the “crimes” of the Templars may have been that they venerated the theology of our Patron Saint John the Evangelist more than that of Saint Paul or Saint Peter.

The tradition of the Saints John carries on to this day in the several British non-Masonic knightly orders. The “Lodges of St. John” existed in London and southern England from the Crusades through the entrance of Freemasonry and even exist today. There can be little doubt that these Lodges had at least some influence on the development of Freemasonry, if they were not indeed Freemasons themselves.

We see that while we can find no real answers to the question of why the Saints John are our Patrons, the lineage of the dedication is clear.

Plato taught that for every thing in creation, including people and organizations, there exists in a non-physical, ethereal subconscious otherworld a perfect form or

ideal of that thing. As Freemasons perhaps we should view the Saints John in that context. According to the Book of the Law, as men we are bound to certain frailties and failures. This keeps us all from becoming ideal men and Masons, no matter how we may try. We should hold for ourselves as the perfect form or ideal of Masons the Holy Saints John. Although we know they were not Freemasons, what we know of them shows them to be perfect examples of what a Freemason should be - kind, righteous, loving and above all faithful unto death to the trust reposed in him. They are the Platonic Form of the Freemason - never to be achieved, but always to be emulated.

Further extrapolated, we can see the mythical Lodge of the Saints John at Jerusalem as the Platonic Form of a Masonic Lodge. It can and should exist as our ideal of what a Lodge of Masons would be if all its members achieved the ideal Masonic state of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist. Perhaps the Christian Mason can even see in that ideal Lodge Jesus Christ as Master and the Saints John as Wardens, composing the perfect Lodge.

While we have now no more answers on this subject than when we started, we have hopefully shed a little more light - or truth, as the Evangelist would see it - on our practice of dedicating Lodges to the Holy Saints John.

As always in Masonry, every revelation is also a veiling and we must always in new knowledge meet new intellectual frustrations. Freemasonry is, after all, the legend of the search for the Lost Word and we are charged to be the searchers.

Hopefully this inquiry ignites some interest in further research and makes the observance of Saint Johns Day a little more poignant for us as Masons.

Source: "...AND DEDICATED TO THE HOLY SAINTS JOHN" -- An inquiry into the designation of the Saints John as Patron Saints of Freemasonry
by W.B. Harvey L. Ward Jr. PM