

The Meaning of the East

The easterly direction is familiar to every Master Mason. We have heard it referenced many times. We see it in every degree, installation, and stated meeting, but we scarcely ever explore its meaning beyond what we heard within the ritual. Though we do hear something of the meaning, as it given us it is superficial at best, or the outer meaning only. Some know a deeper meaning while others think that there must be something more to it, however deeper meanings are seldom literally unfolded within the Craft work. We must always ponder, search, and attempt to connect the dots ourselves. It is the purpose of this paper to express a most unusual meaning behind the term "East." It was uncovered in the study of why we dedicate our Lodges to the Holy Saints John. That article will be of some help in understanding the peculiar findings described within this article. It appears in the Annual Proceedings 2004 of the Tennessee Lodge of Research.

Whence cometh the candidate or brother and whither is he traveling? The answer of course, is from the West, traveling toward the East. Literally, we find this to be true within the physical dimensions of the Lodge because that is the exact path of the floor work. We can then take the answer to be true at the physical and immediate level. But, intrinsic to the formulated answer is a sense that there is something more that is as yet unspoken, unexplained.

Why does he leave the west, or again leave the west and travel toward the east? The answer reveals that the candidate or brother is in search of light or "more light." He is symbolically in the dark, blindfolded and unable to see. But surely we are not talking about seeing the interior of the Lodge itself. Light is a metaphor for knowledge. The ritual does not grant us even a hint as to what specific knowledge the brother is seeking. That must concern only the individual, and it must evidently manifest differently to each brother, as no substantive explanation is given, only allusions.

Light is most commonly taken to mean "knowledge," but exactly what knowledge is unknown. Many newly-made Masons never return to the Lodge, so we must assume that they either experienced an epiphany of great proportion that they no longer need the Lodge, or that the message was all about taking off the blindfold and that was it! Still others may perceive this ritual as some manner of peculiar and outmoded early English for which there is simply no current relevance. Some would suggest that the brother is searching for the knowledge of the mysteries of the Masonic Lodge, while others might say knowledge of the mysteries of life, all of which is essentially nonspecific enough as to be generally meaningless. Others may proffer that each Mason is searching for how to be content with his life or how to participate in some rewarding way. We have all heard to a never ending monotony and ad nauseum that, "Freemasonry takes good men and makes them better." The term better is ambiguous enough as to be interpreted by degrees. "Better" is just not a satisfactory answer in and of itself, for if Freemasonry accepted thieves into its midst and they then only stole occasionally instead of daily it would be "better," but still altogether unsatisfactory. Making good men better men must therefore mean something more. All of the foregoing ideas are good and useful, but there is still much to ask and much to answer in all those explanations. They are all too broad and none really get at the depth of meaning contained in the ritualistic work imparting the important allegories, metaphors, and symbols conveyed in our degrees where the reference to light and the East constantly intertwine. We each believe that we are good men, but exactly what constitutes a good man? Could every man be an essentially good man even though he enjoys his

state of ignorance? Could it mean that Freemasonry in some way lifts a man from the mire of mundane human existence to some greater understanding of himself and that which surrounds him? Could it mean that an essentially good man is a man sufficiently evolved so as to be ready to receive the messages imparted and employ them for his further evolution in his upward path? I think this may be so if we are to accept the messages imparted in the symbolism of the Saints John and interpret for ourselves, individually, the meaning of light in the East.

Why is the East a place of light? Surely, the obvious answer is because that is where the sun rises each day, and it is the sun that illuminates our world. But, we do not worship the sun. Its rising and setting are determined by planetary tilting and orbital rotation. We understand it as a celestial body, a luminescent orb, and an orb that provides light each day to our world and warmth to the earth. Without it plants would not grow, bones would soften, microbes would flourish, and life as we know it would quickly come to a screeching halt. All this and more we already know. Therefore, there must be something more regarding the East as a place of light. We must always recall that the sun was a primary focus for early mankind and it played a part in humankind's early religious experience, and in explanations of celestial events, planting times, and rites of fertility. It has been used as a symbol of the "gods" as far back as mankind recorded his history in stone. It has held symbolic meaning for eons.

In trying to understand why we dedicate our Lodges to the Holy Saints John it was discovered that the path of the sun correlates closely to the messages imparted with the use of the Saints John, the parallel lines and the point within the circle. We discovered that the path of the sun in its travels through the northern and southern hemispheres is so closely tied to the meaning of the landmarks of the Saints John as to be symbiotic in nature. As such we found that the path of the sun illustrates for us the perpetual direction of mankind's real life in its descent and ascent, and essentially tells us that we are all ascending back to our true spiritual identities.

In that exploration it was found that the sun is used symbolically to convey a deeply profound message to each of us, a message that is as clear and concrete as one could hope to find, and lends such encouragement and hopefulness that in the truest Christian form teaches us to discard the notion that some of us will "make it" and some of us will not. We find there the message that we are all evolving and ascending upward, albeit at seemingly different rates.

The message contained in the path of the sun has applicability to all mankind, but the symbolic characterization of the sun in the east and each Mason's search for light is specific to each individual Mason.

The specificity for each of us is contained in the early Christian writings of the Christian Gnostics, those religious works written shortly after the life of Jesus, but not included in the Roman canon of Christianity as dictated by Constantine during the Council of Nicea. In particular, we find in the Secret Gospel of Thomas in saying 19 a question to Jesus from the disciples inquiring as to what their end will be like. In the most extraordinary reply, Jesus asks them if they know the beginning so well that they should now be concerned with end? Buried within Jesus' reply is the answer to why we travel toward the East. We must be in search of the beginning.

As the sun is the beginning of the day and the light of the physical world in which we live so is our Creator the light from which all has sprung forth. In theological terms the historicity of the

beginning is literally given us in the Book of Genesis. Chapter I, verse 3 tells us of God's first command, which was "Let there be light." We reiterate this event "in humble imitation of that sublime and august scene." Verse 4 tells us that God saw the light, that it was good, and divided it from darkness. Light, therefore, was the beginning and as the beginning it was Deity in manifest form. Verse 27 tells us that God created man in "His own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created He them." Contained herein is a glorious hint of the beginning that Jesus prompts the disciples to search out. If we are in search of light as the beginning then we are in search of God. If we were indeed made in the image of God then we too have something of that light within each of us, and therefore we must each then be about the business of seeking our own divine light nature, the nature of who we truly are. "Traveling toward the East" is simply a Masonic way of saying that we must first learn our beginning. Our beginning, from the beginning of the scriptures then, seems to be that of divine light. Knowing the beginning, the end fits right into place, as we descended from the Light so too are we ascending back to it. Know the beginning, and you will know the end! Further along these lines and offered with nothing more than a speculative hint, but with speculation that is astonishing to say the least, I will recall for you that in a gathering of Jesus and His disciples, Jesus inquires of the disciples, "Who do people say that I am." Various ones offer their renditions of hearsay. Thomas offers that Jesus is his Master whereupon; Jesus takes Thomas aside and out of hearing of the others and conveys to him three words. On Thomas' return the others inquire as to what Jesus conveyed secretly to him. Thomas responds "if I tell you, you will stone me to death, and the stones will burst into fire." Obviously, Jesus said something pretty astonishing. If our theory of the east is even remotely close it is then for each Mason to but simply fill in the blanks for himself.

We can be certain that if the Gospel of Thomas has any merit at all as to the intimacy of Jesus' teachings, He must have certainly told Thomas something so astonishing that his brethren would take his life, yet so important that the vignette has been retained and transmitted on even to the present day.

We find in our work clear and unequivocal repetition of those teachings of Christ found within the Gnostic writings of the early Christians, writings suppressed by Iranaeus and later Christian leaders who were more concerned about the orderliness and control of Christianity than the experiential Christianity of the early followers of Jesus. Sadly, little was known of the Gnostic body of literature until 1947-8 when a large cache of Gnostic scrolls was discovered buried outside a cave in Nag Hamadi. In recent years modern scholars have pored over the Gnostic Gospels, Dead Sea Scrolls, and other ancient works and have found new insights into the thought processes and priorities of the early Christians, which has caused many to reconsider the totality of the dogmatic approach to understanding exactly what Jesus was teaching us. Nonetheless, Freemasonry, in whatever forms it may have existed over the past 2000 years seems to have managed to keep these teachings alive and convey them from generation to generation, all cleverly concealed from profane eyes, but yet available to each who seeks to find. We have more today than ever before to reference the teachings and the true nature of ourselves, and it seems that it has always been there neatly contained within our Order. We have only to start peeling the layers away to get to the core.

Although I have never seen a five pointed star displayed in the east of any of our Symbolic Lodges, it seems to be common in the English Lodge and seems to represent the morning star, Venus, which rises shortly before the sun in the pre-dawn sky. At certain times of the year it is also seen as the

evening star, first in the dusky sky before the moon.

The Shekina is referenced within Scottish Rite Freemasonry. The Shekina was taken as the physical manifestation of God in the form of a heavenly light, most brilliant and most unusual to all mankind. In their current book, *The Book of Hiram*, not yet released in the United States, Knight and Lomas take great pains to describe the Shekina as a brilliant light manifested in the pre-dawn heavens caused by the conjunction of Venus and Mercury, a conjunction that occurred on a somewhat regular basis where the number 40 years plays a critical role, and on which they conclude the great events of biblical history; i.e. the flood, Solomon's Temple, the birth of Christ and the advent of the Messiah are founded. Each such great event seems, according to their research, to have occurred either in phases of forty years or in multiples of 40 years, the appearance of the Shekina included as the basis and the signal event. Sadly, Knight and Lomas conclude that the Craft has been searching all these many millennia for nothing more than an astral conjunction mistaken to be the physical manifestation of Deity by the ancients and passed along to the Craft as a great mystery all these many years. Such is the nature of the concrete conclusion that the followers of Amun Ra worshiped the sun itself when, in fact, they may have worshiped what the sun represented or symbolized. It's pretty much the same old ignorance that Catholics pray to statues when in fact the statue merely represents an image or an idea. It is symbolic, not unlike our square and compasses.

Given the context of the Holy Saints John as markers of our path, it seems that Knight and Lomas may have missed the real point. The Shekina as a conjunction of planets offering an extraordinarily brilliant light was surely never taken to be the physical manifestation of Deity in His true form save for those who were ignorant of the higher knowledge. It must be seen rather as a marker, a reminder as light of the truest essence of Deity that humankind could or was capable of appreciating. It is only a representation of our beginning just as the light of the sun marks the beginning of the day and as Saint John the Baptist marks the beginning of our descent, while Saint John the Evangelist marks the beginning of our ascent.

Here then is the true Masonic East. The representation of our beginning and that form from which we all began, that which Jesus admonished his disciples to seek. The East is a representation of our beginning. The Shekina is a glorious and grand reminder of our beginning. We are traveling toward the East because we are each ascending back to our beginning, to our light as spiritual identities in communion with our Creator.

In conclusion, we seek light or we seek more light as the reason to travel eastwardly. We know that the sun rises in the east to illuminate our day. We know also that light is a metaphor for knowledge. Just as the Disciples of Christ, we too are entrenched in our focus of the ending, but Jesus taught us to explore the opposite end of that thought. Know the beginning! Just as the Great Architect of the Universe was, and is, the beginning, so too is the sun in the east a symbolic beginning of each day, representing for us our beginning and the knowledge of how we were created. Understanding this, it is open for every Mason to speculate as to what those three words were that Jesus spoke to his disciple, Thomas. Just as the dedication of our Lodges to the Holy Saints John depicts in symbolic form the ever descending-ascending path of mankind, so too does the sun depict for us every day the meaning of that ascent in the form of our individual light. This is the individual depiction illustrated for us by the Point Within a Circle and thusly explains for us why we are incessantly traveling toward the East.

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