



PAPER

Holy Saint John

Summary: John the Baptist & John the Evangelist twin early 'Patron Saints' of Freemasonry.

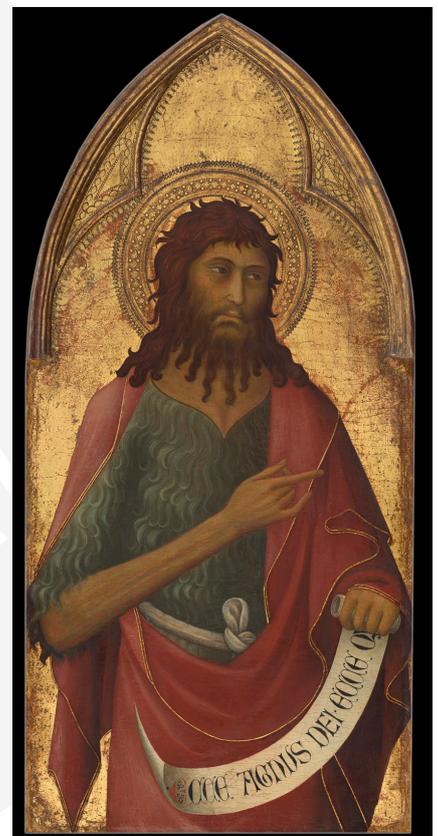
What on earth has Saint John got to do with Craft Freemasonry? Not a lot you might imagine, but you would be wrong! To begin with; there are no less than 57 Craft Lodges within the English Constitution that have been consecrated in the name of St. John. It is significant that the First Grand Lodge was formed at a meeting held on the Festival of St. John the Baptist (24th June). Thereafter, all London Lodges were dedicated to the 'Two Saints', John the Baptist and John the Evangelist; and continued to be so dedicated until the union in 1813. The date of the reconciliation of the two Grand Lodges to form the United Grand Lodge of England also took place on St John's Day (the Evangelist), on 27th December 1813. For many years, anniversary celebrations took place to commemorate this important event in the calendar of the Craft, but like so many things of importance in our Order, it has over the years fallen into disuse.

Having established this as a matter of fact, many Brethren may well ask why have Masonic Lodges been dedicated to the Holy Saints, St John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist? This would seem to be understandable if most of our members were Christian, but this could be seen as incompatible with the non-sectarian character of our Order. There are in fact 678 Lodges within the English Constitution dedicated to the name of a Saint!

We are proud to claim that we have members of many faiths and the followers of many different creeds, and this is what has made our wonderful Fraternity so sound and strong. So, we may with confidence pursue the subject with open minds and begin by taking a look at the historical background.

Saint John the Baptist: Was also known as John the Forerunner; John the Baptiser; The Precursor (the harbinger of good news).

John the Baptist, the son of Zacharias, was a descendant of priests on both sides of his family. He was born six months before Jesus, who was his cousin. He was ordained a Nazarite from birth; that meant that he was one set apart for God, in his case for all his life. He lived for part of his life near to the Dead Sea and he was associated with the Essene Sect. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in an ancient Essene Monastery on the shores of the Dead Sea, evidence their ideas and beliefs which is reflected in John's thoughts and writings.



*Saint John the Baptist, Lippo Memmi,
probably c 1325, Samuel H. Kress Collection*

The four Gospels in the Bible's New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all describe John the Baptist, in almost the same language. He was spoken of as *'the voice of one crying in the wilderness'*,¹ whose sole purpose was to prepare the way of the Lord and *'make his paths straight'*. He must have been a remarkable, well respected and important man, for all four Gospels to refer to him in similar terminology. In fact, this is exceptional and extremely rare. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself says of John *'Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist'* (Luke 7:28) high praise indeed. He was so called because he preached and baptised people in the River Jordan and lived a simple and devout life. Matthew 3:4 – 6 says:

'And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.'

This is a picture, shared by hundreds of monks who lived in the wild places of the Middle East and North-Africa. There have been countless such people in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In fact, they can be found in any religion, in any place, in any century. These remarkable people withdraw from society, to live alone, or in monasteries with others of a like mind. They see the evils rampant in the world, and use their lives as sermons of rejection of the world, spending hours in meditation and prayer.

To the Freemason this picture represents the symbolism of humility, as evidenced in the scriptures Mark 1:7:

'... There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.'

Referring to our saviour, in John 3:30 affirms:

'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

In this context John the Baptist was willing for Jesus to go before him and above him.

The Masonic Historian Joseph Fort Newton, (1880–1950), a Grand Chaplain and ordained minister who served churches in Texas, Missouri, and London, called this, *'John the Baptist's self-effacing humility'*. Referencing the fact that he was glad to proclaim another's superiority. John knew his position and tried to fill it to the best of his ability. Another lesson that we, as Free and Accepted Masons, might learn!

John preached a code of conduct of single-minded righteous living. His message was that one must live in a Holy manner, and that any deviation from this way of life was unacceptable. For his refusal to change his beliefs, and his dedication and his devotion to Jesus, John was imprisoned and eventually beheaded by King Herod. Perhaps now we can understand why we, as Freemasons, we can identify with this behaviour and hold him in such high esteem. Perhaps we can also understand why to members of our Ancient Craft, his story of heroism, fidelity, and, echoed in the legend of Hiram Abiff; and explains why he was chosen as a Patron Saint of our Masonic Order.



Saint John the Evangelist: In Christian circles he is called ‘The Beloved Disciple’ and is often designated to be ‘the Disciple whom Jesus loved’. He is described as gentle, mild mannered, and quiet. He was the son of Zebedee and Salome and made his living as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. His older brother James, to be known as James the Greater, joined him as a Disciple of Jesus. They were often called the ‘Sons of Zebedee’.

According to the scriptures John went to Rome, and during the persecution under the Emperor Domitian, was thrown into a pot of boiling oil. We do not know how he escaped, but unlike his compatriot John the Baptist, he lived to be an old man; unlike all the other Apostles, who were martyred.

There are many striking reasons why Freemasons would choose the Evangelist as Patron and his writings read almost like Masonic ritual. For example, 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 in the beginning 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 the 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 creation becomes of primary importance. John the Evangelist leads us forward in that direction.

What else does Saint John the Evangelist teach us as Masons? Firstly, John the Evangelist, was always known as ‘The Apostle of Love’ and his Gospel is often known as the ‘Gospel of Love’; he uses the term ‘love’ in his writings no less than 43 times. For example, in John 13:34, he quotes Jesus:

‘A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another ...’

Again, in John 15:13, we find that well known verse often used as a quotation in modern times:

‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

For some incomprehensible reason when in the 17th century version of the King James’ Bible was published the word ‘Charity’ was substituted for the word ‘Love’. Nevertheless, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, Saint Paul summarises wonderfully what Saint John the Evangelist intended:

‘And now abideth faith, hope and charity [LOVE] these three, but the greatest of these is charity.’



Saint John the Evangelist, Lippo Memmi, active c 1317 – c 1350, Yale University Art Gallery

Moving on, John the Evangelist has another and possibly an even greater contribution to Freemasonry. Let us remind ourselves that our Fraternity is based upon the practices and tools of operative Masons. We call ourselves 'Speculative Masons', not building in wood and stone, but in the hearts of men. We are not building another Temple of Solomon but a 'spiritual Temple'. It is this Temple that is discussed in the Gospel of John.

This form of Temple building moves us from the physical and materialistic realm, which so governs our lives for much of the time, to the inner, unseen, basic principles of our lives, and onward to eternity. As Freemasons it is in the realm of soul and spirit that we construct our spiritual Temple.

Arguably, it is this unseen factor in life that can enable people like Gandhi to become the father and spiritual leader of India; Abraham Lincoln to rise above the log cabin on the frontier to become one of the world's greatest Statesmen of all time; gave rise to the devotion and dedication of one Sir Winston Churchill in 1939, at a time of need for the nation. It is this remarkable; 'spiritual Temple', which it is the foundation of Speculative Masonry, and one we may often forget. We forget when we spend time and effort on forms and paperwork and ignore the substance. We forget when we make or follow plans and yet fail to see the people for whom we plan. We forget when we emphasise the exactness of our ritual and lose the spirit and meanings behind it.

Fortunately, somehow, when we withdraw from the world for a short time, and in the humility find the love of Brotherhood and the fellowship with God, we continue to learn to draw designs upon the tracing boards of our minds; and begin to build the real Temple of Masonry, that indescribable spiritual Temple within our hearts.

Nothing in history tells us why the 'Saints John' were selected as Patron saints of Freemasonry. Though whatever the facts may be, surely it is in accordance with the fitness of things that we do honour these two names: John the Baptist - the stern prophet of righteousness, and John the Evangelist - the teacher of love.

Endnotes

1. John 1:23, Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

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