

A SHORT STUDY OF THE SYMBOLS ON THE PRINCIPAL BANNERS

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In the English system of the Royal Arch we refer to the four Principal Banners as "the leading Standards of the four divisions of the army of Israel, which bore devices of a Man, a Lion, an Ox and an Eagle". The Banners themselves have been taken to represent four of the twelve tribes, i.e. Judah, Dan, Ephraim and Reuben, each of these being the leading tribe in a group of three. We might therefore expect the devices on the Banners to be identical with those shown on the counterpart ensigns for these tribes, among the twelve that are positioned in the main body of the Chapter. This, however, is not the case for in only two instances does the device match, viz., the Lion for the tribe of Judah and the Ox for the tribe of Ephraim. The symbols that are usually displayed to denote the tribes of Dan and Reuben are quite different and because of this disparity a closer study of the subject is invited.

The Bible is strangely silent on the form given to the Standards and no details are supplied regarding the symbols. The injunction given to Moses and Aaron was:—

"Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by *his own standard with the ensign of their father's house*. . ." (Numbers ii. 2.). (¹)

The pictorial inventiveness of the Old Testament commentators was restricted to variations on themes inspired by Jacob's so-called "blessings" on his eleven sons and two grandsons. I find it difficult, however, to believe that members of the tribe of Reuben would wish to advertise that their founder was described by his father as—"unstable as water, thou shalt not excel . . ." (Gen. xlix. 4.). I also feel that the tribe of Dan would have preferred to illustrate the designation—"Dan shall judge his people"—rather than, "Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, . . ." (Gen. xlix. 16-17); furthermore, my sympathy would certainly go to the tribe of Issachar which is purported to have been represented by a loaded ass motif.

Divisional Standards

The discrepancy between the devices on the Principal Banners, which apparently represented the four camps, and those on the appropriate ensigns for these tribes, seems to have been resolved by treating the Principal Banners as Divisional Standards, each bearing a badge for a group of three tribes and each placed at a cardinal point of the compass, Judah in the east, Reuben in the south, Ephraim in the west and Dan in the north. In fact, in 1836, Bro. Harris, of Tracing Board fame, designed one for the Royal Arch showing the tribal ensigns ranged on four sides about the Tabernacle. Three ensigns are shown in line on each side, with a Divisional Banner dominating the ensign of the centre tribe, which, in each case, is not the Tribe-in-Charge.

An engraving of this Tracing Board appears in the Rev. George Oliver's book *Historical Landmarks of Freemasonry* (²) in which he comments very favourably upon it, especially on the Egyptian influence portrayed by Harris. Imaginative flights of fancy such as this very quickly gain the stamp of authenticity and, to some Companions, the legend very quickly becomes a fact.

Ezekiel's Vision

Having established that the symbols displayed on two of the Principal Banners differ from those derived from the interpretations of Jacob's patriarchal "blessings", we pass to the next possible source, one of the visions of the prophet Ezekiel. I say "one of the visions" because many are recorded. In this particular vision

Ezekiel described "four living creatures", each one having *four faces*,—a man ... a lion ... an ox ... an eagle." (Ezekiel i. 5-10).

An interpretation of the four faces is beyond the scope of this study, but it should be noted that ideas were expressed in such forms. The composite creatures described by the prophet were typical of the period; e.g. about twenty years earlier than this Babylon had conquered Nineveh in an action which ended the Assyrian empire, and we have ample evidence of their sculptured composite figures in the human-headed-winged-bulls recovered from that country in later years and currently displayed in the British Museum. This influence is, I think, reflected in Ezekiel's vision.

The Babylonish Captivity, or Exile, was in two stages, the first when Jehoiakin capitulated, in 599 b.c., Zedekiah then being placed on the throne as a vassal king; the second was nearly thirteen years later when the population of Jerusalem was denuded of the remainder of its important people and its potential leaders. The City and the Holy Temple were then destroyed (586 b.c.).

The prophet Ezekiel was exiled in the first stage and the vision which we now consider occurred after only five years in Exile; before the Temple had been destroyed. The overall pattern of his visions traced something of the history of his people covering the generations dating from the Egyptian Bondage to some years after the demolishing of the Temple, He cherished hopes of a reuniting of the divided tribes; described in detail plans for the building of a new Temple and a new Jerusalem as the City of Righteousness—the spiritual Capital.

Revelation of St. John

A parallel vision with similar hopes of a New Jerusalem is recorded in the *Revelation* of St. John, but, with a difference; the "New Jerusalem" described here is essentially spiritual and Heavenly and contrasts strikingly with the earthly one, or, as the Evangelist terms it, "that which now is". Here also are described four creatures, again with an important difference: this time they are four separate beings:—

"And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast was like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle." (Revelation iv. 7.).

These four symbolical creatures have long been adopted in Christian art to represent the four Evangelists, the allocation being:—

Man, sometimes winged, to represent St. Matthew

Lion to represent St. Mark

Ox for St. Luke

Eagle for St. John

It is not clear in what period this happened but by the 5th century they were well established in Christian art and iconography. ⁽³⁾ This manner of symbolising probably followed the example set by Old Testament commentators who allocated Ezekiel's visionary "four Faces" to four of the Archangels as well as the Four Greater Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Examples do exist in Christian art where the Four Greater Prophets have been linked with the four Evangelists under their respective symbol.

Arms of the Antients' Grand Lodge

For a Masonic development of the use of these symbols we turn now to Laurence Dermott who adopted quartered Arms to distinguish the Antients Grand Lodge. The first appearance is in their Book of Constitutions dated 1764 (2nd Edn.), compiled by Dermott and given that enigmatic title—*Ahiman Rezon*

In an explanatory item Dermott attributes his source to—"a coat-of-arms found in the collection of the famous and learned Hebrewist, Rabi [sic] Jacob Jehudah Leon", and he wrote the following as his justification for using it:-

"As these were the arms of the masons that built the tabernacle and the Temple, there is not the least doubt of their being the proper arms of the most antient and honourable fraternity of free and accepted masons and the continued practice, formalities and tradition, in all regular lodges from the lowest degree to the most high, i.e., the Holy Royal Arch, confirms the truth hereof."

I have strong doubts that Dermott was as naive as this statement would have us believe.

In 1899, in a lively Paper on the Rabbi Leon, Dr. Chetwode Crawley wrote:- (4)

"It has been established that Leon really did leave among his papers many scores of drawings illustrative of the Talmud and its legend. An inspection of his published works will show that he was prone to embellish them with coat-of-arms and allegorical designs. . . . The anachronism of ascribing coat-armour to King Solomon and his Craftsmen would not have weighed for a moment with antiquaries of the Rabbi's day and generation" (5)

Dermott would have been fully acquainted with the application of these symbols in Christian art and, seeing that he aspired to some knowledge of Hebrew would have been interested in any Talmudic treatment of them. It is reasonable to think that he would have been quite able to see in them a number of Biblical allusions, from the first book in the Old Testament to the last Book the New Testament. It is, however, doubtful that he could have foreseen their eventual appearance in the Arms of the United Grand Lodge of England about fifty years after he chose them and twenty-two years after his death.

In March, 1919, the Board were given permission by Grand Lodge to apply for Royal approval, through the College of Arms,—"It being felt that the coat of arms displayed by Grand Lodge should receive sanction more authoritative than that of prolonged use . . ." and the following September the Royal approval was announced.

Finally, may I remind our Companions that the symbols on the Principal banners, as indeed most symbols in Freemasonry, have a much deeper interest for us when we learn something of their derivation and background. In the light of this knowledge we can be that much more selective in our interpretation of them and our understanding will help us to be more appreciative of their purpose.

(1) My italics.

(2) Historical Landmarks of Freemasonry Vol.II, facing p. 584, Rev. G. Oliver Spencer London, 1846

(3) Sacred and Legendary Art. P 78 et seq, Jameson, 1850 Longman, Brown and Green, London

(4) Rabbi Jacob Leon, A.Q.C. Vol XII, p157 (1899)

(5) Born 1603. Died c. 1673.