

What's On

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A bit of Royal Arch ritual has intrigued me for years. If you are a Royal Arch Mason, you will immediately know the word and its place in the ritual, but if you are not a Royal Arch Mason, then it will suffice for the purposes of this paper for you to know that the word "On" appears in the ritual in connection with the name of Deity. "On" has significance to the Royal Arch Mason, but who, or what is "On?" Let us explore this word.

About 130 miles up the Nile River is the ancient Egyptian city of Cairo. About six miles to the northeast of Cairo is the village of Matariyah. This village is located on the site of an ancient cultic center, a city named Heliopolis. Nearby is Tell Hisn. A tell is a mound or hill formed by shifting sands and dirt as a new civilization following a destroyed civilization again and again builds a town or city or village upon the dry bones of their predecessors.

Many, many tells exist throughout the Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile River valleys and along the North African coastal areas. Some tells are several hundred feet high. The area we are now concerned with, that of the Nile River in the vicinity of Cairo, has been inhabited by civilized men for more than 3,000 years before the birth of Christ.

The name Heliopolis means, in Greek, "City of the Sun." To clear matters for geography and history buffs, there was an ancient Heliopolis in Egypt located on the Nile River and also there was an ancient Heliopolis in what is now Lebanon, about fifty miles northeast

What's On - George B. Yeates

of Beirut. Both cities were religious centers. The Lebanese town is now called Baalbek. Civilization in the Lebanon area, too, is ancient, going back more than 2,000 years before Christ. However, the object of our inquiry is Egyptian Heliopolis.

The Egyptians called this city "Iwnw" or "Inw." From this comes the Hebrew word "On." The Babylonian name for the city was "Anu" and the Assyrians named it "Unu." The name Heliopolis is Greek and was applied during the flourishing of the great Greek and Roman empires. Alexander the Great's empire included the Nile valley as far south as Syene (which is about 500 miles south of the Mediterranean Sea).

With this background we will consider the familiar name "On." The "On" we know in Royal Arch Masonry is the Hebrew name for this city Heliopolis, one of the more important cities of ancient Egypt. Jeremiah refers to the city in the 43rd Chapter, verse 13, as "Bethshemesh" (KJV), a Hebrew word meaning "Shrine of the Sun (god)." Isaiah does not call it by name, but in the 19th Chapter, verse 18, he speaks of "five cities in the land of Egypt," and most authorities denote Heliopolis as one of those five.

Herodotus, the Greek father of history, who was born about 485 B.C., visited Heliopolis. There he found a center of religion and of scientific studies. While there he learned that the Egyptians had discovered the solar year of 365 days. About the religion, he had to say in part: "I am not anxious to repeat what I was told about the Egyptian religion, apart from the mere names of their deities, for I do not thin any nation knows much more about such things than any other. . ." Previous to his journey to Heliopolis, Herodotus had conversations with priests of Hephæstus in Memphis and Thebes.

The obelisk known as "Cleopatra's Needle," now located in New York's Central Park, and its twin companion in London, were originally erected in Heliopolis by Thothmes III, who

What's On - George B. Yeates

reigned in Egypt from 1503 to 1449 B.C. As a bit of information, one of the cities conquered by Thothmes was Tyre, a city well known in Masonic circles.

Heliopolis was known by a sacred name by the Egyptian priests. This name was "Per-Re" or the city of Re. During the centuries prior to Christ's birth, Strabo, Solon, and Thales¹ are said to have visited the schools at Heliopolis. It is also said that Mary and Joseph, with the baby Jesus, rested there during their flight from Herod in Egypt.

"On" was not a god, neither was it the name of a god. "On" was the name in Hebrew of a city, just as Richmond, Roanoke and Portsmouth are the names of cities in Virginia. Notable at "On" during the Hebrew era was the temple to "Ra," the Egyptian sun god. Early theology at "On" had as its chief god, "Atum," who later was incorporated with "Re" into "Atum-Re," the sun god. This was during the third dynasty of Egypt, or about 2,700 years B.C. Thus, we see that "On" was an important religious center 1,500 years before Moses lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt.

Perhaps our early Masonic ritual writers became confused in terminology. We read in Genesis, Chapter 41, verses 45 to 50, about Joseph's marriage to Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of "On". We read further, Chapter 45, verse 50, that two sons, Manaseh and Ephraim, were born of this union between Joseph and Asenath, the daughter of this priest of "On". The name "Potiphera" is a transliteration of the Egyptian words for he who Re has given." Thus, his name explains that he is a priest of the god "Re."

¹ Strabo: Greek geographer and historian, 63 B.C. -24 A.D.

Solon: Greek lawmaker (one of the seven wise men of Greece), 639 - 559 B.C.

Thales: Greek geometrician and philosopher (one of the seven wise men of Greece), 624 - 546 B.C.

What's On - George B. Yeates

It was variously explained by early Masons that "On" was the name by which Jehovah was worshipped among the Egyptians. However, modern studies have proven "On" only to be the Hebrew name of a cultic center of ancient Egyptian worship of pagan gods.

In the Royal Arch ritual "On" is associated with the Chaldeans. A short inquiry into these people is helpful. The Chaldeans were descendants and very closely similar in culture and religion to the Akkadians. The Assyrians and Babylonians were also descendants of the Akkadians and related to the Chaldeans. The language of the Chaldeans was that of their city-living cousins, the Babylonians, whose chief god was "Marduk." This "Marduk" was certainly no name for Yahweh (the Hebrew God). Marduk was a Babylonian god.

The list of Assyrian gods has more than 1,500 names on it. Some of the oldest were "Anu", meaning the "heaven" and "Enlil", the god of the sacred city of Nippur. There were "Shamash," the sun god, and "Sin," the moon god. But none of these represent Yahweh. "On" is certainly not a Chaldean name for one of their deities.

Shall we then leave the Royal Arch tetragrammaton as it is? Theologically, it is incredible. Then considered logically, it fails. A reasonably thinking person is struck with the absurdity of the composition. It is a reported authenticity that could not possibly be such. Do we search for a solution? Perhaps there is another explanation for "On." Perhaps somewhere in the mysteries of Freemasonry, there is a plausible answer.

What do you think?