

Whence Came You? A New Look at an Old Question

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I would first like to thank you for the great honor which you have bestowed upon me by asking me to speak to this august assembly today. In one sense I am not worthy to enter the room and be present with so many distinguished and dedicated brethren. Yet, in another, I am reminded that there was once a day when even the great Allen Roberts presented his first paper to a Research Lodge, thereby justifying my own presence by Immemorial Right, meaning from a time we cannot remember.

The origins of Freemasonry are a subject about which much has been said but very little resolved. Simply stated, there are at least three schools of thought. First, that modern Freemasonry is descended in some sense from the operative stonemasons, the great Cathedral builders of England in the Middle Ages. Next, that at the time of the suppression of the Knights Templar, either a secret society was formed which adopted the title of "The Freemasons" to escape torture and suspicion, or that the Templars merged with the Freemasons for the same reason. Lastly, that modern Freemasonry originated with the ancient mystery religions.

It is not my purpose to directly analyze any one of these theories, however, I may comment on each of them throughout the body of this paper. Suffice it to say that I have listed them in the order in which they are supported by credible, verifiable evidence, though the last theory listed has no such evidence to support it.

I have endeavored to abide by the golden rule of criticism, that truth is the great object to be sought, and not the maintenance of an opinion, because it was once expressed,

while keeping in mind that evidence must always modify critical opinions, when that evidence affects the data on which such opinions were formed. In weighing the evidence I have applied the rules of evidence applicable to my own craft.

In my opinion, having examined and tested the credible evidence on the origin of Freemasonry, there is only one conclusion which may be stated beyond any reasonable doubt, and that is that the origin or foundation of modern Freemasonry was purely Christian, regardless of the vehicle in which the Fraternity has moved through time.

This opinion is neither intended to nor should it alienate any one of you. Rather, it is to say that the spirit of brotherly love taught and embodied by Jesus Christ is the same spirit which unites us into one sacred band or society of friends and brothers. I ask you to forgive those who lash out at you, and me, in His Name and call your attention to His life and Word contained in the Holy Bible, the great light of Masonry, which clearly teaches all of the virtues upon which this great Fraternity is founded and which I know each of you hold near and dear to your hearts.

To my knowledge, it is undisputed in the literature that, prior to 1723, the requirement for admission into the fraternity or lodge was faith or belief in Jesus Christ. The person requesting membership had to be a Christian. It is clear that the Rev. Dr. James Anderson broke new ground when he published his Constitutions in that year by leaving Masons' particular opinions to themselves, "by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished."¹ While an analysis of the purely Christian origin of modern Masonry would necessarily look to the time period prior to 1723, a brief word about the period of time which followed will be valuable.

Our attention is called to a Masonic exposure published in London in 1724 which indicates that the ritual at that time was Christian as shown in the following exchange:

¹ McLeod, Wallace, *The Grand Design*, in "The Origin of Freemasonry, and the Early Years of the British Grand Lodges," pp. 25-6, Anchor Communications, 1991.

"How many lights? Three.... What do they represent? The three persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost."²

Indeed, in the struggle for power between the "Ancients," six lodges who formed a second Grand Lodge of England in 1751 according to the "Old Institutions," and the "Moderns," the lodges which formed the original Grand Lodge of England in 1717, one of the main points of contention was that the "Ancients" wanted to preserve the ancient practices while the "Moderns" were accepting men who professed religions other than Christianity and were de-Christianizing the ritual.³ On the Festival of Saint John the Evangelist, December 27, 1813, the struggle ended with both Grand Lodges joining to form The United Grand Lodge of England.⁴

Modern Masonry contains vestiges of the influence of both groups. In Virginia, suffice it to say that, today, "almost every facet of our initiatory ceremonies are not only Biblical but have generally Christian tendencies."⁵

Thus, as so aptly stated by Most Worshipful Cabell F. Cobbs, PGM, it is not surprising to find the Introductory Preface to our first Virginia Constitutions referring to the basis of Masonic principles as the wisdom of *HIS GLORIOUS SON*, or that those same Masonic principles are cultivated daily by every Mason "through the grace and goodness of His DIVINE SPIRIT, THRICE BLESSED, THREE in one eternal GODHEAD."⁶

This influence was and is not new, rather, it comes from the very heart of our heritage.

² Id. p. 25

³ Id. p. 29

⁴ Id. p. 30

⁵ Cobbs, Cabell F., PGM (VA), *Transactions*, Virginia Research Lodge No. March 27, 1992, "Freemasonry and the Church," P. 17

⁶ Id.

It is now well for us to look to the evidence which exists of our origin which is contained in the "Title Deeds" or *Old Manuscript Constitutions* which obviously formed the basis of the Rev. James Anderson's *Constitutions* and whose connection with Operative and Speculative Freemasonry is beyond question at this point in history. I should point out that I do not concede that Freemasonry existed only in operative form at any time after its genesis, however, I will save that point for another day.

Important to this analysis is the fact that approximately 75 of the 113 ancient Manuscripts predate the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717. Those written after that date were clearly taken or copied from earlier versions. More importantly, the 113 texts of the *Old Constitutions* all say basically the same thing. So much so that our learned brother, Wallace McLeod, has reconstructed a "Standard Original"⁷ and he is thoroughly convincing in his argument that the Standard Original, written sometime between the years 1520 and 1583, is a document from which all subsequent texts proceeded.⁸ Thus, an analysis of McLeod's "Standard Original" is an analysis of about 110 of the 113 *Old Constitutions*. The Standard Original is entirely supportive of and proves the proposition that Masonry, as it existed at all times prior to 1723, was wholly Christian in its requirements, precepts and charges.

First, all of the *Old Constitutions* from the Standard Original on contain the following invocation:

"The might of the Father in Heaven, with the wisdom of the glorious Son, through the grace and goodness of the Holy Ghost, that be three persons in one Godhead, be with us at our beginning, and give us grace so to govern us here in our living that we may come to His bliss that shall never have ending. Amen."

⁷ See, McLeod, Wallace, *The Grand Design*, p. 13

⁸ Id. at p. 34, p. 39

The Standard Original and its progeny, after a discussion of the seven liberal arts and sciences, go on to give a history of the science of geometry or Masonry, the facts of which are largely taken from the Bible. The history traces geometry or Masonry from Adam, through Noah and even through Abraham, David and Solomon. While many guilds and crafts named religious figures as patron Saints, none in Great Britain has ever documented a lineage as Godly or as legendary as does ours.⁹

It is important to this analysis to note that all of the men named as promoters of Masonry, whose names occur in history and who lived after the death of Christ, were either Christian Saints, Christian Martyrs or Christian Kings.

The first mentioned is Charles Martell or "Charles the Hammer," King of France, a hero of the early Church for defeating the Muslim invaders who made no more great invasions against France after their defeat by "The Hammer" at the battle of Tours. He also supported St. Boniface and other early evangelists at the request of Pope Gregory II. Charles is said in the manuscripts to have been made a Mason and to have helped make other men Masons.

The Standard Original traces the origin of Masonry in England to the time of Saint Alban, stating that the King of England at that time was a pagan who left Saint Alban in charge of building a wall around the town that is now called Saint Alban.

It is noteworthy that Saint Alban was the foremost, if not the first Christian Martyr of England, being murdered, it is supposed, in 303 A.D. Venerable Bede, priest and the father of English history, records that St. Alban served in the Roman army under Diocletian and, after his return to England, was converted to Christianity by a fugitive priest he sheltered. St. Alban is said to have exchanged clothes with the priest and was thus martyred.

⁹ Gould, Robert Freke, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, revised edition 1911, Yorston Publishing Company, 1951.

I should note at this point that the *Cooke Manuscript*, an earlier document dated c. 1400/1410, also contains a reference to Saint Alban in conjunction with a Saint Amphibalus. While the truth of the assertion that Masonry came to England through Saint Alban cannot be conclusively shown, other than by the 110 or more ancient Masonic manuscripts which say so, I find it compelling that the histories of the craft tie themselves so closely to ancient Christian Martyrs.

Indeed, history also records that Saint Amphibalus was the priest or missionary from Rome who arrived at Verulamium, now the city of St. Albans, during the Diocletian Persecution of Christians and who was given shelter by Saint Alban, then a pagan of Roman origin and high rank. Alban was converted to Christianity by his guest and their martyrdom followed shortly thereafter, along with that of numerous other Christians and "New Proselytes."¹⁰

The Standard Original then describes the decline in Masonry following certain wars which Anderson, in the 2nd edition of his *Constitutions*, says were with the Danes, who burned the monasteries thereby destroying most of the ancient records of the brotherhood. That the records of the brotherhood were housed in the monasteries shows the closeness of the relationship between Freemasonry and the Church and also infers that the meetings were held there. It then states that Masonry rose again during the reign of King Athelstan (925-940 A.D.). King Athelstan was the first King of all of England and was a Christian, as evidenced by his glorious achievement of translating the Bible into the Saxon language.

In the *Roberts Manuscript* c. 1722 it is said of Athelstan that he built Abbeys, Monasteries and many other religious houses. In the Standard Original he is said to have built "many great works of abbeys, castles and divers other buildings." As the Church goes, so goes Masonry.

¹⁰ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. 1, p. 87, Yorston, 1911

The Standard Original also mentions that Athelstan had a son named Edwin, not recorded in history. English history does record that an earlier Edwin was the first Christian King of the Northumbers, expanding the Christian realm north of York for the first time, who in 627 A.D. aided in the building of a stone Church at York after his baptism there.¹¹ English tradition links Masonry to the church building at York by the operative brotherhood under Edwin in 627 A.D. and also to a guild chartered under Athelstan in 927.¹²

Finally, the *Cooke Manuscript*, previously referenced, also contains a reference to the youngest son of King Athelstan who learned practical Masonry in addition to speculative Masonry, of which he was a master!

Thus, the *Cooke Manuscript* is the earliest writing which has yet to be discovered in which speculative Masonry is actually mentioned and where a master of the craft is acknowledged.

Whether the Edwin mentioned was really Athelstan's son or whether reference was intended to be made to the Christian King, the reference to Edwin ties the craft to the Church and its heroes.

One final note on the Christian character of the Standard Original Manuscript and its progeny: in "The Charges General" Masons are admonished that "The First Charge is that ye shall be true men to God and the holy church...," and another is very much like it as regards treatment of others, "... ye shall do to them as ye would they should do to you."

Indeed, no portion of these manuscripts is inconsistent with a Christian origin.

I turn again to the *Cooke Manuscript*, previously referenced, the second oldest known manuscript in existence. The invocation here is somewhat different, being made to "God

¹¹ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. II, p. 372, Yorston, 1911

¹² Id.

Our Glorious Father."¹³ It also traces our origin through Adam, Noah, Lamech and their children. It represents the first time when the legend of the preservation of the science of geometry from the ravages of the great flood, in the form of two engraved stones ultimately discovered by Pythagoras and Hermes, is found in a Masonic Manuscript.

A most interesting aspect of this Manuscript is the abundant testimony it offers respecting the statements it makes as to the origin and progress of Masonry. It not only mentions its consistency with older books generally, it bolsters its credibility by reference to Bede, Isodor, Methodius and the "Master of Stories," or Petrus Comestor, author of the well-known *Historic Scholastica*, as well as to the *Polychronicon*.¹⁴

The *Polychronicon* was the standard work on general history in the 14th and 15th century. Isodor or Isidore was a Spanish Christian who lived in the 7th century A.D. and who wrote manual of science and a general history as well.¹⁵ Bede or Saint Bede, the Father of English history, was a well-known priest who also lived in the 7th century A.D. He was also an Evangelistic missionary who was reported to have told his missionary priests not to deny the existence of the Pagan Gods worshiped by the Anglo-Saxon tribes directly but rather to teach the people that the Priests had come to clarify for them the true identity of those whom they worshipped and to identify them in a manner consistent with the teachings of Christ and the New Testament.¹⁶ He wrote a history of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon tribes as well as an ecclesiastical history of England.

The history of Masonry contained in the *Cooke Manuscript* was obviously not compiled from oral tradition alone but from the Bible and other credible sources by a man of learning.

¹³ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. I, p. 46, Yorston, 1911

¹⁴ Gould, Robert Freke, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, Page 135, revised edition 1911, Yorston Publishing Company, 1951.

¹⁵ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. I, p. 89, Yorston, 1911

¹⁶ Robinson, John J., *Born in Blood: The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry*, pp. 194-5, M. Evans & Co., 1989.

I should now mention the *William Wilson Manuscript*, or the "Plot" family original manuscript, a 15th century manuscript which has for a heading the Masons' Arms and the Motto: "In The Lord Is Al[*I*] Our Trust". This Manuscript is the link between the *Cooke Manuscript* and the Standard Original. It is consistent with the *Cooke Manuscript* in most regards. It also mentions the same Amphibal who converted Saint Alban after coming from France to England and he is said to have given Saint Alban the "charges". The author of this manuscript tells us that his history came from the "Old Charges of Saint Alban and King Athelstan" and the "Story of England." The Old Manuscript that he copied from probably mentioned that Athelstan had a younger son and it is suspected by Gould that he provided the name of Edwin of Northumbria, taken from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹⁷ It is probably from this Manuscript that the story of Edwin is carried forth to the Standard Original and all subsequent copies.

Lastly, this Manuscript states that the charges transcribed therein had been read and allowed by King Henry VI and his counsel which Gould feels is true and occurred after 1437 when a statute was passed forbidding the passing of new ordinances by guilds and fraternities without the sanction of the public authority.¹⁸

We now turn to the oldest and therefore most valuable "Title Deed" of modern Freemasonry, the *Halliwel Manuscript*, otherwise known as the *Regius Manuscript*. According to the most accurate information available, it was probably transcribed about the year of 1390 from a still earlier copy.¹⁹ I feel it well proven that the document was penned by an Augustinian Canon at Lanthony Abbey. The Augustinian Canons were a monastic Order which arrived in Britain in the early part of the 12th century and who followed the Rule of Saint Augustine of Hippo.

¹⁷ Gould, Robert Freke, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, Page 135, revised edition 1911, Yorston Publishing Company, 1951.

¹⁸ Id. at 138

¹⁹ Hamar, Douglas, "Further Consideration of the Regius MS," Communicated by Brother F.R. Clarke, Q.C.C.C., P. 166.

I would point out that the members of the order were not preachers as such but were to assist the priests and to lead the laity by living with them and setting a Godly example. They are known to have established infirmaries in some places to care for the sick and distressed.

I should point out here that a portion of this document was borrowed from a poem written by John Mirk, himself an Augustinian Canon, which was entitled *Instructions for Parish Priests*. In the *Regius Manuscript*, there is no distinction made as to when that portion begins, thus, it is obvious that the document itself was intended to be read as a whole. This becomes more obvious as we see that the author of the *Regius Manuscript* made a change of person from the third to the second when adopting the extract from Mirk's "Instructions" which, thus read, urges Masons to be faithful members of the church and instructs them on behavior during service, on prayer and on mass.²⁰

In the same regard, the author of the *Regius Manuscript* prints in its entirety, also without a separate heading identifying it as such, the "Tractus Urbanitatis" poem which teaches social manners. While there is some dispute on this point, it has been suggested that courtliness was the standard of life in monasteries as Monks and Canons were recruited from the non-military sons of families of means.²¹

The *Regius Manuscript* itself begins with the bold assertion that "Here begin the constitutions of the art of Geometry according to Euclid." It references an older book from which the history of the craft and the articles and points were taken. It traces the history of Geometry through Euclid and then asserts that the craft came into England during King Athelstan's reign. It has been previously mentioned that Athelstan was the first Christian King of all England. It also describes a great assembly of Masons and royalty and then sets forth fifteen articles which were for the governance of the craft and which came out of that assembly. Thereafter, it recites fifteen points which were adopted at this assembly

²⁰ Id. at 166, 168; *Regius Manuscript* at lines 591-692

²¹ Id. at 168

and, I would point out that, in the first point, it is stated that those who will know the craft "must love well God and holy Church always."

These articles and points are consistent with those contained in the *Cooke Manuscript* and with those contained in the Standard Original and its progeny. That the great bulk of our current ritual may be traced not only to all of the *Old Constitutions* in general but to the articles and points contained in them is beyond question. After the points, the Manuscript goes on to describe another ordinance of the art of Geometry which is peculiar to it and which affirms the story as related to King Athelstan.

The next section begins with a prayer to God Almighty and to his mother, Mary, and goes on to discuss "The art of the four crowned ones." This, in my view, is the most interesting aspect of this fascinating Manuscript. The prayer asks that Masons might keep the articles and points as well as the four holy Martyrs did. The four holy Martyrs are described as honored in the craft and are termed "as good Masons as on earth shall go..."

Review of the Manuscript itself as well as of ancient martyrologies which come to us starting with Saint Jerome from around 400 A.D., through Bede around 730 A.D. and through other ancient religious Manuscripts, tells us that these holy Martyrs, who lived in approximately 300 A.D., were highly skilled in the art of cutting stone and were secretly men of the Christian faith.

Their secrecy was particularly important to the continuation of their lives under the persecution of the Christians by Diocletian. There is no need to rehearse here the terrible persecution suffered by the early Christian church which led to secret meetings and secret modes of recognition in order to escape torture and death. Diocletian ordered the four crown Martyrs to sculpture a Pagan idol that the people might worship it. "Yet, they were steadfast in Christ's law and to their craft without doubt" and refused to make the idol and were killed for their refusal after increasing punishment only produced in the four greater joy in their steadfast faith.

New Testament study indicates that a conflict arose in the early Church surrounding unholy Pagan practices required of all members of certain guilds in the early days of the Church including participation in orgies and eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods. Support of one's family and continuation of livelihood depended upon membership in the guilds. Membership was conditioned upon the performance of these rituals clearly forbidden by the teachings of Christ. To not perform the rituals was to not be a member of the guild and thus be not employed. To perform the rituals was to engage in behavior contrary to Christian faith. This dilemma is mentioned or alluded to in many places in the New Testament.

There was great debate in the early Church whether Christians should compromise their faith to save their jobs or should forego their jobs to be steadfast in the faith. As for the four crowned Martyrs, their choice was clear, they were "as good Masons as on earth shall go ..."

Consider this: it is generally accepted that quality in the art of statuary declined greatly after the period of the four crowned Martyrs or 300 A.D. The inferiority of later sculptures is not now questioned. Baronius attributes this decay to the ever-increasing number of Christians involved with that particular aspect of working with stone and marble and indicates that the possessors of that art were "almost without exception converted to Christianity."²²

Baronius is regarded as one of the greatest Ecclesiastical historians. I am forced to wonder aloud what happened to those craftsmen when the need for sculptures declined with the Roman Empire at a time when the need for workers in stone increased in Europe as the Christian church spread. Indeed, if the Masonic manuscripts are to be believed,

²² Gould, Robert Freke, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, Vol. II, pp. 92-3, revised edition 1911, Yorston Publishing Company, 1951.

Masonry came to England just prior to St. Alban being martyred, around 303 A.D., and we know Christianity was continued in Britain from that time forward.²³

The four are said to have martyred between 287 A.D., the earliest date given, and 303 A.D., the latest. One could not fault Christians, craftsman or otherwise, for fleeing Rome and seeking employment in Britain during the Diocletian persecution.

Perhaps they did. No other group of craftsmen were as close to the church as the stone workers were. They were the cornerstone of the building trades. They made the churches, many of which still stand today to the glory of God and to the credit of the great mission of the church to evangelize the world.

A few last words about the *Regius Manuscript* are in order. On November 1, 1388 Richard II ordered that all guilds and crafts make return to him and his officials of their charters and letters patent under the penalty of disannulment if not so exhibited. Thus, each guild, craft or brotherhood needed to produce the document justifying their existence in order to continue. That this order came just prior to the writing of this Manuscript is, believe, no coincidence and I am joined in that belief by Gould.²⁴ If we accept this proposition as truth, the Regius Manuscript gives us a picture of the full life of the craft at the end of the 14th century. That view is wholly and purely Christian.

A few last words about the *Old Constitutions*, first, Gould recognized their distinctly religious or Christian character after his careful analysis and review.²⁵ Additionally, all of the Scottish versions of the old charges are of English origin and thereby of the same character.²⁶

²³ Id. at 105

²⁴ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. I, p. 81, Yorston, 1911

²⁵ Id. at 103-4

²⁶ Gould, Robert Freke, *A Library of Freemasonry*, Vol. II, p. 53, Yorston, 1911

It was said at the ecclesiastical trial of the Presbyterian minister, Rev. James Ainslie, in 1652, objection having been taken because he was a Freemason, that "In the purest times of this Church, Masons have been ministers, that Masons and men having that word have been and are daily in our session, and many professors having that word are daily admitted to the ordinances." That solemn declaration of the Presbyterian Church recorded in 1652 proves that Presbyterian ministers were members of the Masonic fraternity before 1600 because the purest days of the Presbyterian church would be the years between the Reformation of 1560 and prior to the introduction of the Episcopacy in 1610.²⁷

A brief look at some of the statutes and ordinances in effect during the Middle Ages will provide us with one last glimpse of the connection between Masonry and the Church. The *Schaw Statutes No. 2*, A.D. 1599 mandated that the Wardens of every lodge were answerable to the Presbyters or Churches in their area. That statute also empowered the Warden or Deacon to evict from the society all who disobeyed the statutes or who were disobedient to the Kirk (Church) or Craft.

I should also point out in this regard that the statute required the selection of a skilled notary to be the Clerk or Scribe and these individuals, of necessity, would have either come from the Church or from nobility as only they had access to education.²⁸

Lastly, the legend of the four crowned Martyrs, previously discussed, is the thread between British Freemasonry and German Freemasonry as seen in The Torgau Ordinances of 1462 "concerning the Worshipful Masters of Stonemasons of the Craft, the Wardens and the Fellows of the Craft."

That statute or ordinance starts off with the invocation: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, in the name of the blessed Virgin Mary, and in honor of the four crowned Martyrs...."

²⁷ Id. at 64-5

²⁸ Id. at 10

You are already aware of the importance of the Holy Saints John, both historically and at present to the Craft, and you have heard the prayers in the Lodge and you probably know that it was John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, who coined the phrase "Great Architect of the Universe." You have heard the lectures and the references to the merits of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and you have been raised by the power of that Lion who we know from reading the New Testament is and was none other than Jesus Christ.

We are taught that the Holy Bible is to be the rule and guide of our faith: We must never move from that teaching. I think it important to remember from whence we came as it should give us some idea of where we are and that knowledge should guide our Craft in its future travels.

Wallace McLeod responds

Editor's Note: Because Wallace McLeod was mentioned as the foremost authority on the Old Charges the editor asked him to review Brother McGrath's article. What follows is McLeod's interpretation.

Before the Protestant Reformation, practically everybody who lived in England was white, English-speaking, and Christian (Roman Catholic). It naturally follows that the operative masons of England exhibited these same characteristics. With regard to religion, the early documents cited by Brother McGrath makes this quite clear. It looks as if only Christians were allowed to become stonemasons.

But soon after the foundation of modern Freemasonry in 1717, the Craft began to demonstrate a greater degree of tolerance. This new approach is signaled in Anderson's *Constitutions*, where (as Brother McGrath notes) a Mason is allowed to belong to whatever religious group he chooses, provided only that he believes in a Grand Architect of the Universe (G.A.O.T.U.).

Whence Came You? A New Look at an Old Question - Richard Tyler McGrath

(It is important to note that this was a startling innovation, and that it had been approved by the Masters and Wardens of every constituent Lodge.) As a result, Freemasonry was years ahead of society as a whole in demonstrating tolerance. And so we soon begin to find mention of, for example, Jewish Brethren, which would theoretically have been impossible in the operative period.

This was the first step towards a worldwide brotherhood of man – that wonderful feature that makes Freemasonry practically unique.