

THE SYMBOLIC FOUR - an interpretation of the
R.A. Principal Banners

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is of a twofold nature. Firstly, to stimulate interest in the symbols on the four R.A. Principal Banners, and secondly to suggest that, in the light of the suggested interpretations one may possibly conclude that an albeit small, but significant, amendment in our ritual is necessary.

As to the first objective, it may fairly be said that a deeper understanding of the symbolism in Freemasonry is desirable in itself, and necessary to a fuller interpretation of that understanding. The second objective is perhaps best left for further consideration in the Conclusion of this paper.

In R.A. masonry 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." This extract from our ritual is at the very heart of this paper.

HISTORY

The quotation should first be considered against an historical background. The situation of the tribes of Israel following the Exodus from their Egyptian captivity was that they had been organised into a disciplined force in the wilderness of Sinai and had been ranged on four sides surrounding the Tabernacle.

There were twelve tribes divided into four groups of three and each group had a leading tribe, the four leaders being Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan. It might be expected that the devices on the banners of the four leading tribes would identify with the devices of the Principal Banners, if we again consider the quotation from our ritual. An examination of the banners of the twelve tribes here positioned in the centre of our Chapter shows this not to be the case entirely for only two of the Principal Banners correspond with the tribal Ensigns - Lion for the tribe of Judah and Ox for the tribe of Ephraim. The

symbols displayed for the other two leading tribes - Dan and Reuben - differ from Ensign and Principal Banner and, because of this disparity, you are invited to a closer study.

The Bible itself gives no hint regarding the form given to the Standards and nowhere do we find details of the symbols or devices on them. The Book of Numbers tells us that

"Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father's house....."

Thus it is established that some form of tribal identification existed, but the nature of that form is not apparent.

THE INTERPRETATIONS

For the purposes of this paper I have considered two main forms of interpretation of those symbols and devices in use in our Order. Since their original form is not known, we must ask ourselves how did these forms come into use in R.A. masonry and the answer, I would submit, is to be found in the two ~~main~~ main interpretive sources to which I have referred. These are Biblical and Philosophic.

The Biblical source may be - indeed must be - considered from two streams - one in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament.

In the Middle Ages commentary of the Old Testament was often in the form of illustration, and the devices we see depicted on the Ensigns on the staves of our Chapter are derived from pictorial inventions by such commentators. Jacob is recorded as having given "Blessings" to each of his eleven sons and two grandsons. Ten of the twelve Ensigns depict a remark made by Jacob about each son in his "blessing". Eleven sons and two grandsons give us a total of thirteen, but men of the tribe of Levi were not numbered - their duty was generally to act as assistants to the Priests and to transport the Tabernacle and its Holy contents.

Reuben was Jacob's eldest son and the remark - "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel" - indicated that his tribe would fall, just as water falls to a lower level. On the Ensign the motif is wavy lines whereas in the Principal Banner it is a man.

Judah, the fourth son, was chosen to be leader. He is likened

to a lion and as, following the remark - "thy father's children shall bow before thee" - the sceptre of authority would not depart from him, we see depicted on both Ensign and Principal Banner, a crown, a lion and a sceptre.

After the Palestinian settlement by the tribes, the leaders became known as Judges. Jacob had remarked in his "blessing" - "Dan shall judge his people" - thus investing him with leadership. Dan had also been compared to "a serpent by the way, an adder in the path....". He was to succeed by stealth. Thus the snake depicted in the Ensign, but the Principal Banner shows an Eagle.

There are other discrepancies between the devices on the Principal Banners which appear to represent the four camps and those on the appropriate tribal Ensigns. This discrepancy appears to have been resolved by classifying the Principal Banners as Divisional Standards, each bearing a badge for the group of three tribes stationed at a cardinal point of the compass - Judah in the East, Reuben in the South, Ephraim in the West and Dan in the North.

Jacob's "Blessings" or rather the interpretation of them, are thus one explanation of the symbolic differences between two Principal Banners and their tribal Ensign counterparts.

Another Old Testament source of interpretation may be discovered in one of the visions of the prophet Ezekial. In this particular vision he described "four living creatures" - each having four faces - "a man... a lion...an ox...an eagle." Ezekial was exiled in the Babylonish captivity and this vision occurred before the Temple was destroyed. His visions described his hopes for the reunion of his divided people and the building of another Temple in a new Jerusalem.

It is at this point we may turn to the New Testament interpretation of our Principal Banners. Six hundred and ninety years after Ezekial's vision, in the year AD 96 in the Revelation of St. John we read of a parallel vision - the building of a new Jerusalem. St. John's vision was essentially spiritual, not earthy, but he too describes four figures: "And the first was like a lion, 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."

In Christian art these four symbolical creatures are depicted as the four Evangelists:

Man - St. Matthew
Lion - St. Mark
Ox - St. Luke
Eagle - St. John the Evangelist

Symbolising in this manner by Christian interpreters and commentators probably followed the well established pattern set by their Old Testament predecessors for they allocated the four creatures to the Archangels:

Man - St. Michael
Lion - St. Gabriel
Ox - St. Raphael
Eagle - St. Uriel

Similarly, they were made to represent the four Greater Prophets:

Man - Isiah
Lion - Daniel
Ox - Jerimiah
Eagle - Ezekial

Many examples abound in Christian art of this kind of symbolism and interpretation. They may be found in stained glass windows, in carvings and processional crosses.

The interpretations of the four Principal ~~Tribe~~ Tribes by Philosophers presents interesting comparisons - one group interpret them as the four elements - Earth, Air, Fire and Water - and another philosophic group, the Talmudists, equated the jewels of Aaron's Breastplate to the Twelve Tribes.

Some philosophers have taken the Twelve Tribes as symbolising all mankind and have ascribed the twelve signs of the Zodiac as the heavenly counterpart. The constellation of Leo (the lion)

represents Judah; Aquarius for Reuben; Scorpio (the snake) for Dan; Taurus (the bull) for Ephraim.

The Zodiac is not referred to in our ritual, but it is often seen in the decorations of masonic temples. Companions, no one could be closer to this philosophic interpretation than the members of this Chapter, for I need hardly remind you that the signs of the Zodiac are a central theme of our own Banner.

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that the study of the symbols on the four Principal Banners inevitably leads to the conclusion that those Banners cannot be the "leading Standards of the army of Israel." The only reference to camp and military standards is in the 2nd chapter of the Book of Numbers:

"they of the standard of the camp of Judah of Reuben....of Ephraimof Dan...."

There is no mention of the form of the standards or of the signs on them or any indication that they were different in any way from the tribal banners of the Principal Tribes in each group of three.

If the symbols had been derived from the angelic forms of Ezeial's vision, they would have proved only faces. However, if we consider them to have been derived from the four Beings of the vision of St. John, an event which occurred some 1300 years after the wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai, then, I submit, a much more acceptable interpretation and explanation emerges.

On this basis, it may fairly be argued that the four Banner-symbols have a Christian origin, having been taken from St. John. Support for this view may be found in the Symbolical Lecture of our Order. Therein the Banners are not referred to in a left to right order as one might expect - Ox, Man, Lion and Eagle - but they are given in the form in which the Gospels appear in the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This is not surprising if one reflects on the vital influence of the Christian

faith on the lives and work of the early compilers of our rituals. There are many references to quotations from the New Testament - for example the early wording of the Scroll found in the Vault was taken from the first verse of St. John's Gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word...."

This clearly being out of place in an Old Testament setting was altered to the present Genesis, chapter 1:

"In the beginning God created the Heaven...."

Early masonic manuscripts from 1696 onwards make reference again and again to similar origins, for example:

"I am sworn by God and St. John by the Square and Compass...."

"I am come from the Holy Lodge of St. John...."

The first Book of Constitutions of 1723 enjoined the brethren to meet on the Feast day of either St. John the Baptist or of St. John the Evangelist.

Thus, it is submitted that these Christian symbols have been adapted for the purpose of the Royal Arch ritual and a small but important amendment could be made to the wording with which this paper commenced:

"The four Principal Banners represent" - TO US - "the leading Standards of the army of Israel."
