



**The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and
Accepted Masons of Virginia**
Committee on Masonic Education



Lodge Presentation Program Paper

**A BIBLICAL AND MASONIC UNDERSTANDING
OF THE “HOLY SAINTS JOHN”**

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June 20th officially marks the summer solstice. In the Northern Hemisphere, this is our longest period of daylight, which will then diminish from this point, somewhere between 30 seconds to 2 ½ minutes daily, until we reach December 21st, the winter solstice with the shortest period of daylight – and after that date, once again lengthening.

So, over the course of six months, here in Virginia, that's a 5 hour, 8 minute and 8 second shift in our daily light (from 14 hours to 9 hours). Of course, at the polar ends of our earth they see a complete change from 24 hours sunlight to 24 hours darkness – for weeks at a time - while at the equator they see no change at all: 365 days with 12 hours of sunlight.

Needless to say, while the equatorial natives were little concerned with solstices, from ancient times, those living at the northern and southern

ends of our planet carefully, even fearfully, marked this shifting from light to dark and celebrated the days of turnaround.

In the Christian world, the Church decided to mark the turnaround from shortest day, traditionally December 25th as the birthday of Jesus the Christ. No one really knows on what day Jesus was actually born, our best guess from Biblical evidence would be in the springtime near Passover. But for theological reasons, in an attempt to eclipse the pagan festival of Saturnalia (the return of the solar Sun), the Church decided to celebrate instead the birth of God's newborn Son.

Then two days after that, on December 27th, the Church added the festival day of John the Apostle also known as **St John the Evangelist** – because he bore witness to Jesus as the “light shining in the darkness – that could never be overcome.”

The Church then placed the birthday of **John the Baptist** on June 24th – six months ahead of Jesus' birth - since Scripture does record that John's mother, Elizabeth, was already six months pregnant when the Virgin Mary conceived. Of course this places John the Baptist's birthday in line with the Summer Solstice.

Why do I bother you with these two men and these celestial dates? Because in the Christian world, all of our Blue Lodges are dedicated to the Holy Saints John – the evangelist and the baptist – recognizing this pair as their patron saints, and making a point of celebrating their festival days of December 27th and June 24th

The persons of the evangelist and the baptist also play a significant symbolic role in Masonic thinking, serving as models of true Masonic character. I agree that you can probably find no better character models than this pair who represent the balance of heart and mind, passion and thought, in the life of a Mason or anyone.

So let me tell you a bit more, from the Christian tradition, about these two Saints John.

According to the Bible, **John the Baptist** was conceived and born six months ahead of his cousin Jesus. And yes, they were cousins, how close we don't know, but Elizabeth was identified as Mary's relative. It is highly likely that with the closeness of their births that John the Baptist and Jesus spent much of their early childhood as playmates and friends.

Interestingly Elizabeth's husband Zechariah was a Levite (of the priestly tribe of the Hebrews) and was actually serving his turn in the Temple when the Angel told him of John's conception. While Mary's husband Joseph was from the tribe of Judah – the kingly line of Israel but – since Rome had taken charge – they no longer recognized such kings.

Of course, the Magi, those Persian Astronomers who came looking for the baby Jesus, knew of this heritage and innocently informed Rome's appointed ruler, Herod the Great of their opinion that once again a true King had been born for Israel.

But let's return to John the Baptist. In a normal life, this young priestly class child would have followed his father into temple service and perhaps spent his adult years serving as a local rabbi – teaching Torah to the villagers. But in the Christian tradition, God had other very special plans for John. From birth, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

In addition, like the prophet Elijah before him, in whose role he would one day come upon the scene, John was to be raised in the wilderness as a Nazarite – far away from the rest of the world – a person wholly dedicated in person and mind to the service of God.

So, when the adult John later shows up in the Jerusalem countryside, an unknown and passionate preacher, eating locusts and wild honey, wearing rough clothing and proclaiming a baptism of repentance, his hearers knew that, just as it was last promised by their last prophet Malachi, that Elijah had returned to herald the coming of the Messiah.

John was a man of passion, a man of total dedication. With the Baptist there were no compromises. He saw the world in black and white and he gladly would let you know right where you stood in your relation to God: he boldly called the most publically religious people of his day a brood of snakes, and he taunted their less than sincere desires to hear his preaching. John also publically criticized Herod Antipas for his divorce and incestuous remarriage. This of course led to John's arrest and eventual beheading, but not before he had accomplished his appointed task of turning many hearts back to God and of heralding Jesus as the coming messiah.

So, let us turn to the other: **John the Evangelist**. What most people don't know is that John and his brother James, who were among the inner circle of Jesus disciples, were also his close cousins (their mother Salome and Mary being sisters). These two brothers grew up in the same neighborhood with Jesus and were probably also childhood playmates. So, when the adult Jesus invites James and John to drop their nets and follow him, he is not talking to strangers but to friends who knew him all their lives.

Further, if you know your Biblical history, you will know that while James becomes the second martyr to the Christian faith, about fifteen years after the death of Jesus, his brother John eventually lives for over one hundred years becoming the last survivor of the original twelve apostles.

It is interesting to note that in Masonic symbolism, just as John the Baptist represents heart and passion, John the Evangelist comes to represent mind and reason.

But at the start you would never have expected that of the young disciple. This is because while the Baptist's passion was mature, trained, and focused wholly on God, the young John was perhaps equally passionate, but in an unfocussed, immature, and violent sort of way. For this reason, he, along with his brother James, earned the nickname "sons of thunder" because they had once wanted to call down lightning from Heaven to annihilate a town for being less than hospitable to Jesus' traveling band.

So how did John the Evangelist come to represent reason and thought? It was only after a series of events:

- As he grew and watched his friend and mentor Jesus live, die, and rise again from the grave,
- Then as he took on the personal care and protection of Mary his aunt and Jesus' mother,
- He subsequently watched his own brother beheaded for the faith and in their turn all the other apostles also die bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus.
- He was tortured (supposedly boiled in oil) and then exiled to the island of Patmos for that same faith.
- And finally, he wrote his Gospel account, his letters to the Churches, and that final treatise which he titled as "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," – although John would never take credit for authorship of this final book.

Only through a long life of trial and struggle for the faith would John the Apostle become a man of wisdom and quiet reflective strength, known to the Church as the Apostle of love.

So, there you have the Biblical accounts of the Holy Saints John – the patron saints of Christian Masons. In the Christian realm, they have always formed a unique pair standing beside Jesus.

But now let us go a bit further to explore what the pair have also come to represent within the Masonic universe.

In these two saints, Masons are given the balanced dualism of **John the Baptist**: young, passionate, dogmatic, an outspoken man of action, willing to die for his principles, and **John the Evangelist**: mature, loyal to the last, a man of deep nuanced thought and carefully chosen words.

Together these two saints represent the realm in which a Mason (or any person for that matter) should live: balancing youthful zeal with maturing knowledge.

Our Masonic literature depicts this balance as a certain point within a circle bordered by two parallel lines.

- These lines represent St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist;
- And upon the top rest the Holy Scriptures.
- The point represents the life of the individual brother;
- The circle, the boundary line of his duty, beyond which he is never to suffer his passions, interests, or prejudices, to betray him.

In going around the circle, we necessarily touch on the two parallel lines, as well as the Holy Scriptures. There is a time for thought and a time for action all guided by reflection upon God's holy word.

If a Mason, or again any person, keeps himself circumscribed within these due bounds, it is impossible that he should materially err.

But let me show you another way in which representations of the two Saints John show up in the Mason's life.

Saint John the Baptist standing in the river Jordan, pouring water over penitent's heads, or dunking them completely if it was just after the spring floods – is often represented by the **inverted pyramid**, the Alchemical sign for water, representing the spiritual and emotional love.

Saint John the Evangelist, who wrote of the light shining in the darkness is represented as the pyramid pointing up symbolizing fire that is the drive and will of action.

And when placed together, they symbolize the perfect balance of darkness and light, life and death, passion and constraint, will and emotion, winter and summer: unity and wholeness of life.

Together both represent the interlocked Star of David, and also the Masons Square and Compass.

So, whenever you look at the Square and Compasses, think of the Holy Saints John and live your life accordingly.