

# The Holy Saints John

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The Saints, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, are made known to Freemasons in several places in our catechisms. Their placement and use in our rituals have been questioned for many years.

When looked at together, Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist serve to represent the balance in Masonry between zeal for the Fraternity and learned equilibrium. The Saints John, stand for perfect parallel harmony representing that balance.

From a historical approach, the Saint John's festival is a widely celebrated Masonic holiday. Traditionally June 24<sup>th</sup> (or the Summer Solstice) is taken to be John the Baptist's Day, which is celebrated in many cultures around the world. According to MaCoy's Masonic Dictionary, it is a duty of every Mason to participate in the Festival of St. John in summer, and which serves as an opportunity for renewal and strengthening of fraternal ties as well as a celebration of Masonry from "olden times." Thus, it functions as a connection between the past and the future.

For non-Masons, the festival has been called the "Setting of the Watch," where ceremonial bonfires are lit after sunset. Tradition says that men, women, and children across Europe would jump through the fires for luck. This holiday is celebrated in many ways: with oak wreath crowns, wild flowers and birch branches. Families would feast and celebrate in union. The meanings of these ancient traditions are lost today on our society, but the link was made at some point to John the Baptist. It is thought that these festivals have been linked in character and content with the birth of John the Baptist. The online Catholic Encyclopedia points to the birth of John the Baptist as six months before Christ, placing that event on the summer solstice.

To return to the Masonic perspective we are presented with the balanced dualism of John the Baptist on the one hand and John the Evangelist on the other. Represented together, these figures may symbolize the balance of passionate zeal and learned knowledge of faith forming a space to reflect in and to channel our passion as well as our education/knowledge. Individually strong, together they stand for harnessed focus of zeal and knowledge. This counterpoint is not only necessary to Freemasonry, but it can be applied to all areas of life. Taken as an abstract compilation of symbols, together they represent a well-balanced path towards enlightenment.

The two dualistic figures as one, the Holy Saints John, balance each other in the Masonic year, but also in other areas too. One unique aspect that some have found is in the application of the alchemical symbols of fire and water. Alchemy has long been thought of as an early component of Freemasonry and using the alchemical symbols here may help the representations of the Saint Johns look more familiar. Saint John the Baptist, represented as the inverted pyramid, the alchemical sign for water, representing the spiritual and emotional

love. St. John the Evangelist, representing the pyramid as pointing up symbolizing fire that is the drive and will of action. When placed together, they symbolize the perfect balance of darkness and light, life and death, passion and constraint, will and emotion, winter and summer. Together both represent the interlocked star of Solomon, or the Square and Compass. This is an entirely open analysis, and made for the purposes of comparison, but it does offer a unique analysis of the juxtaposition of the Holy Saints John.

In looking toward the future, the birth date of St. John the Baptist is an appropriate celebratory day for Freemasons, as it is a good day to come together and reflect on our past and on our future. It reminds us, not just of our past, but also of our passions being circumscribed. In all of our time as a Fraternity, celebrations of unity such as this help us to reaffirm the ties that bind; whether those ties be the bindings of fraternity or the familiarity of an institution, we should remember that historically our sacred Lodges, were anciently dedicated to King Solomon because he is said to have been our first most excellent Grand Master, but in this country, Masons dedicate their Lodges to Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist, who are said to have been two eminent patrons of Masonry.

Let's look at the symbolism for a moment. There is represented in every regular and well-governed Lodge a certain point within a circle bordered by two parallel lines, representing St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist; and upon the top rest the Holy Scriptures. The point represents 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; and while a Mason keeps himself circumscribed with these due bounds, it is impossible that he should materially err.

The festival days set aside for these two saints by Freemasonry, are June 24th, for St. John the Baptist and December 27th for St. John the Evangelist. Both of these dates coincide with the Summer and Winter Solstices respectively. The parallel lines which border the circle are also said to symbolize the two solstices.

Now let's look at the history of this Masonic event. Prior to Christianity, the celebrations of the change of the seasons were marked with many pagan celebrations. For example, December 25th was already a major festival in the pagan Roman world. The "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," falling within the week-long celebration of the Saturnalia, was a feast honoring the renewal of the sun at the winter solstice. It included feasting, dancing, lighting bonfires, decorating homes with greens, and giving gifts. Sound Familiar? The early church wanted these pagan festivals stopped, but they were very popular with the people and they continued to celebrate them. The solution to the problem was simple; substitute Christian meanings and Saints to these holidays and continue to celebrate them. Therefore, the celebration of the summer solstice became the Festival of St. John the Baptist and the celebration of the winter solstice became the Festival of St. John the Evangelist.

But why did Freemasonry select the Holy Saints John as their patron saints rather than Saint Thomas, who is the eminent patron of architecture and building? According to Albert Bede, adoption of the Saints by Freemasonry predates the first Grand Lodge of 1717. Many of the Operative Lodges had been dedicated to the Baptist and a few to the Evangelist. The

Baptist seems to have come into Freemasonry before the Evangelist.

It may be significant that the first Grand Lodge was formed at a meeting held on the Festival of St. John the Baptist.