

DERMOTT' S AHIMAN REZON

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Some Judaic Aspects of Freemasonry

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*One, Chiefest, comprehensive,
Proving to Gentile, Jew,
Our Order all extensive,
And to its spirit true;
Go ask the Prussian people,
They'll praise our Zetland's name,
While synagogue and steeple
Our oneness loud proclaim*

-- Freemason's Quarterly Review 31 December 1846

THE ANCIENT CHARGES

When we consider the frequency with which our ritual emphasises the craft's close connections with King Solomon's Temple, it is not surprising to find that among the uninitiated particularly, Freemasonry is so closely equated with Judaism. It is all the more ironic, therefore, that our Masonic forefathers, because of the Trinitarian nature of our early ancient charges, excluded the Jews and other non-Christians from participation in Freemasonry. The emphasis on the Christian nature of the Craft in its earliest days is to be found in the preamble to each of the early rules and regulations of the Operative Masons known as the Old Charges. Well over one hundred such documents have now been discovered spanning more than half a millennium, the earliest of these, *The Regius Poem or Manuscript*, now in the British Museum dates to *circa* 1390. Each of these precious documents, written on parchment rolls, begins with a prayer to *the Father of Heaven, the Glorious Son Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Ghost*. Every Mason today will be aware of these Old Charges. The opening pages of the current Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England begin with a *Summary of the Antient Charges and Regulations* that are essentially the rules first promulgated in the Old Charges referred to above. These Charges are read to every Master Elect before he is installed into the highest Office in his Lodge.

Almost paradoxically an inference to early freemasonry not being of a Trinitarian nature after all, is to be found in the earliest known leaflet attacking the craft as a *Devlish sect of Men*. The leaflet was distributed in the streets and coffee shops of London in 1698 and is addressed *To All Godly People, in the Citie of London*. In it, Freemasonry is condemned for the anti-religious standing of its membership. It confirms that Freemasonry was considered an evil institution because oaths were taken against all non-Masons. A most interesting conclusion reached by Knoop and Jones, who analyzed this pamphlet in great detail, is that the statement that the Masons were anti-Christ implies that they must have been anti-Trinitarian. Thus Freemasonry may well have adopted an open and tolerant attitude towards religion long before Anderson's constitutions of 1723, which is the normally accepted date for what has become known as the *de-christianisation of the Craft*. This term was not intended to refer merely to the fact that Jews and members of other denominations were now allowed to become Freemasons. It was a reference to the removal by Anderson of Christian allusions in his Constitutions and the adoption of a wider view of religion, accepting a belief in God irrespective of one's religion.

This development in the Craft is to be found in the first of the *Charges of a Freemason* entitled *Concerning God and Religion*. The opening sentence, except for one single word, is identical in both Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 and the current Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England, which states:

A Mason is obliged, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious libertine.

(The 1999 edition of the Book of Constitutions reads *understand* whereas Anderson's version, correctly I would suggest, states *understands*). The next sentence in Anderson's version is the key statement in the context of the *de-christianisation of the Craft* referred to above:

But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves;

In our modern version of the Constitutions this sentiment reads:

Let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the order, provided he believes in the glorious architect of heaven and earth...

Some arguments have been put forward that, rather than an opening of Freemasonry to all religions, Anderson's intention in his statement was a compliance with the increasingly popular Deistic movement, referred to above in the context of the 1698 pamphlet. The concept of Deism, in contrast to Theism, professed a belief in God, which discounted religion. The revised wording of the same sentiments, however, in the second Constitutions of 1738, when the word *Religion* is replaced with *Christian usages* have dispelled any such doubts.

JEWISH PARTICIPATION

When the premier Grand Lodge was formed in London in 1717, there were an estimated 1000 Jews in England. Although their participation in Freemasonry would in any case have been limited, the evidence shows that several had joined the Craft well before the dates attributed by the Rev Dr George Oliver (1782-1867) who gave 1740 as the earliest date a Jewish brother being initiated. The Jewish participation in Masonic activities can only be identified by the Jewish names on various lists, since the religious affiliation of a Brother was nowhere recorded. Although this way of identification cannot be foolproof, it is reasonably reliable. Thus there is no evidence of anybody of the Jewish faith being made a Freemason before 1721. In that year two Jews, Nathan Blanch and John Hart, are recorded as being initiated in the time-immemorial Lodge of Antiquity now No 2. Henry Sadler points at a Brother Israel Segal of the unnumbered Solomon's Temple Lodge and Bro Nicholas Abraham of the Golden Lion Lodge no 44, both on the 1725 engraved *List of Lodges*. By 1730 many more Brethren are identifiable and two, Moses Mendez and Samuel Lowman are appointed Grand Stewards for the year 1738-39.

Of a total of 23 petitioners for Lodge number 246 constituted on 24 August 1759 (named *Union Lodge*, in 1773), the majority of the Brethren were of the Jewish faith. The late Brother John Shaftesley, past editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* and a member of my own mother Lodge, *Faith & Friendship* number 7326, has also identified a *Jews Lodge*. It is noted in the index to a Masonic Register of 1766 and he thinks it to be Lodge number 145 but I have been unable to trace in Lane's *Masonic Records* a Lodge that would fit Bro Shaftesley's details. Individually, the first recorded Jewish Grand Officer of the Premier Grand Lodge appears to be Moses Isaac Levi who was appointed Senior Grand Warden in 1785. The first Grand Officer of the *Antients* who has a Jewish name is David Lyon, appointed Grand Tyler for the three year period between 1760 and 1763.

PAPAL BULLS AND MORE

It is thus that we can accept one of the several reasons for the overt antagonism of the Church toward the Freemasons. The 1738 Papal Bull of Clement XII *In Eminenti*, was directed at Freemasons, banning the participation of Catholics in their activities under the penalty of ex-communication from the Church, because, *inter alia*, the fraternity allowed the participation in their membership of individuals other than Christians. The second Papal Bull *Providas* published in 1751 was translated into English in the 1754 edition of Scott's Pocket companion. The same reasons were repeated for the banning of Catholics from Freemasonry. The next two Papal Bulls of relevance to freemasonry, by Pope Pius VII, *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo* in 1821 and *Quo Graviora* 1825, continued in the same vein of an anti-Masonic and now an overt anti-Semitic stand. The latter bull incorporates as usual, a condemnation of the Masonic fraternity and in the encyclical *Etsi Multa Luctuosa* issued by Pius IX in November 1873 the emphasis on the Jewish characteristics of Freemasonry, in the eyes of the Vatican, is pin pointed, the Masonic Lodge being referred to as *Sinagoga di Satana* - Satan's Synagogue.

Notwithstanding these negative aspects in our history, there has from the beginning been an affinity between Judaism and Freemasonry. Freemasonry teaches the same moral principles of brotherly love, relief and truth that are inbred in Judaic doctrine. Charity in Freemasonry and the equivalent concepts of *Tzdaka* and *Rachmanut* in Judaism are pivotal to both bodies. In the early days of Freemasonry, when being a Jew in England had distinctive disadvantages, the Masonic fraternity offered a haven of equality and tolerance. The Masonic ritual and ceremonial so closely identifiable with the Old Testament would have been of particular appeal to members of the Jewish community. Freemasonry will have afforded an opening for integration to an otherwise isolated group and will have attracted man of good moral standards, irrespective of their faith, Jews amongst them.

LAURENCE DERMOTT: MASON EXTRAORDINARY

It is in this environment, of greater and happier Jewish participation in Freemasonry, that we reach that important crossroads in the history of English Freemasonry. The establishment of a new body of Freemasons who set themselves up in explicit competition to the Premier Grand Lodge of 1717. On 17 July 1751 a General Assembly comprising of Irish Brethren from five lodges met with a view to founding a new Grand Lodge which materialized on 27 December 1753, the date on which the first Grand Master, Robert Turner, was installed. It became known as the *Grand Lodge of England According to the Old Institutions* or *Grand Lodge of the Antients*. Within a year of its establishment in 1751, the Brethren of the new body appointed Laurence Dermott as their Grand Secretary. He held the post for very nearly 20 years. Here was a man and Mason of extraordinary capabilities who dedicated the rest of his life to the cause of the *Antients*. It was important for Dermott, in establishing the credibility of his own newly formed Grand Lodge, to emphasize the differences between *The Antients*, and the older Premier Grand Lodge which he successfully and paradoxically dubbed *The Moderns*. He put forward a varied number of arguments, some may suggest that these could be regarded as justifications, in attacking *The Moderns*. He claimed that they had deviated from the ancient landmarks of the order. These deviations may have included the changing round of the first and second degree words and signs and a total disregard and omission of the Royal Arch from their ceremonies. Furthermore, according to Dermott, *The Moderns* had allowed the de-Christianisation of the Craft, contrary to the basic principals of the Order, as evidenced in the Constitutions of the Premier Grand Lodge quoted above.

This last criticism is particularly curious and relevant to the Jewish involvement in Freemasonry at the time. It was important for *The Antients* to publish their own Book of Constitutions as soon as possible and they finally did so, as soon as the opportunity to dedicate it to a Grand Master of Noble blood had presented itself. Thus in September 1756 the Book of Constitutions of *The Antients Grand Lodge* saw the first light of day. It had the extraordinary Hebrew title *Ahiman Rezon*, which has yet to be correctly and finally interpreted. Scholars have spent a century now in attempts to decipher the meaning of *Ahiman Rezon*.

What happened to de-Christianisation?

This, however, was far from being the only Judaic reference in the Constitutions. In the light of Dermott's expressed views about the *de-Christianisation* of the Craft by *The Moderns*, one would not expect *The Antients* to encourage those other than Christians to join the Fraternity. So that it is quite surprising to find the title page to *Ahiman Rezon*, stating, *inter alia*:

...Shewing the Excellency of Secrecy, And the first Cause, or Motive of the Institution of Free-masonry;.....Likewise the Prayers used in the Jewish and Christian Lodges,...

A number of interesting interpretations can be given to this statement by Laurence Dermot in the first page of the Book of Constitutions of *The Antients*. Firstly the inclusion of prayers used in Jewish Lodges implies that Brethren of the Jewish faith were already active members of *The Antients Grand Lodge* by the time of the publication of the Constitutions in 1756. This is also attested by several subscribers mentioned in *Ahiman Rezon* whose

names are indubitably Jewish, namely Israel Wolfe initiated in 1752, Mordechai Isaacs in 1754 and Levi Hart in 1755 all in Lodge number 13. Abraham Jacob is recorded as a salesman of Romney Lane, initiated in Lodge number 16 in 1753 and I have been unable to trace any record of a Lion Solomon mentioned among the subscribers. How had this come about? Did Dermott change his mind regarding the admittance of non-Christian Brethren into Lodges under the jurisdiction of *The Antients Grand Lodge*? It is possible that the increase in membership he had hoped for in the first years of the establishment of *The Antients* did not materialize and the opening of *The Antients* doors to all faiths ensured the growth and survival of *The Antients*. On the other hand Dermott may have never seriously intended to exclude anybody from his Grand Lodge. His semantics may have been directed at and intended for the ears of *The Moderns* only. Interestingly we here have a categorization now strongly denied by our own United Grand Lodge, namely the reference to Jewish and Christian Lodges. Furthermore the words *prayers used in the Jewish Lodges* precedes the *Christian Lodges* as if intended to emphasize the universality of *The Antients*. There is, in fact, no evidence that any such Jewish Lodges existed, let alone the use of prayers used in the opening of any such Lodge.

AHIMAN REZON

The reason for Dermot selecting this strange title *Ahiman Rezon* for his Constitutions remains a mystery. The sub-title by Dermot or, A Help to a Brother does not in any way relate to the heading. Theories abound and Hebrew scholars as well as Masonic ones have yet to come to a conclusion. I support the interpretation given by Brother Shaftesley mentioned above, that *Ahiman Rezon* is an incorrect transliteration of the Hebrew AHIM MIN RATZON which would translate as Brothers by Will. It is the simplicity of this interpretation that is most appealing, especially when the two terms are written out in Hebrew. The similarity of each of the characters becomes apparent. It has struck me as unusual that there appears to be no contemporary comment or record on the meaning of *Ahiman Rezon*. Brethren during Dermott's lifetime would have been familiar with the title but no one seems to have noted its significance. Could this be because to those Brethren present and in touch with Dermott himself, the simplistic meaning mentioned above was blatantly evident and that only with the passing of time did an apparently obvious verbal explanations gradually evolve to become cryptic and mysterious? There are other elements in the Constitutions that may explain the choice of a Hebrew title for this Book. The tail piece to Dermott's Index to the first minute book of *The Antients* is a pen and ink drawing followed by Dermott's signature in Latin as well as Hebrew characters with the word Sofer also written in Hebrew and signifying Secretary.

Above the signature are Hebrew letters interspersed inside various Masonic and other symbols with the Pentalpha centrally placed, the word OMINI above it in Latin letters and Hallelujah below it in Hebrew. Is this Dermott demonstrating his Hebrew scholarship, in which he was known to be accomplished? Or was he merely ingratiating himself with the Jewish Brethren now members of *The Antients* Grand Lodge? Either of these options may also have been his reason for giving a Hebrew title to the Constitutions. We will probably never know.

COAT OF ARMS

The Coat of Arms adopted by *The Antients* and which first appeared in the second edition of *Ahiman Rezon* in 1764 are very familiar to every Royal Arch Mason. The four Jewish biblical symbols of Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle, are prominently displayed in every open Chapter. These same emblems were used as Jewish symbols in a similar format in the early seventeenth Century. Dermott, in an extended note on page xxxiv, gives a full description of the circumstances of their adoption and states that they were *found in the collection of the famous and learned Hebrewist, architect and brother, Rabi (sic) Jacob Jehudah Leon*. Dermott already mentions Rabbi Leon in the introduction to the first edition of *Ahiman Rezon* as Mr. Lyon, one of the Masonic authorities used by Dermot when compiling the Constitutions. Rabbi Jacob Jehudah Leon (b. c1603 d. c1680), was born in Spain and became the Rabbi of the Jewish Communities in Hamburg & later in Amsterdam. His main fame, however, rested with the famous model of Solomon's Temple which was on exhibit in London and which Dermott claimed to have visited. The question has, however, arisen as to where and how exactly did Dermott obtain the authority to use the Coat of Arms attributed to Rabbi Leon. There is a very extended bibliography of all the works of the Rabbi over his lifetime and there appear to be no references or designs executed by him, which is a Coat of Arms. As a hebrewist, he certainly would not have been responsible for the wording at the base of the Arms which, in Hebrew, incorrectly spell out the words *Kodesh La Adonai*, by transliterating the Latin letters. The sentence is repeated in English as *Holiness to the Lord*. The Hebrew letters at the top of our current United Grand Lodge Arms show the correct spelling. There is also no evidence that Rabbi Leon was a Freemason, which is implied by Dermott in referring to him as *hebrewist, architect and brother*.

Dermott is recognized as a powerful and learned man whose activities on behalf of *The Antients* over an extended period of time were sincere and totally devotional. His activities and motives necessarily raise questions and the search for answers will continue forever.

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