

Passages Of Jordan

Unknown

And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah. Wherefore passest thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? We will burn thine house upon thee with fire. And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands.

And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the Lord delivered them into my hand; wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?

Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites.

And the Gileadites took the passage of Jordan before the Ephraimites, and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay:

Then said they unto him, Say ye Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. - (Judges 12:1-6)

This account from the Old Testament is the source material from whence comes the familiar Masonic story of the pass in our Middle Chamber lecture.

Mispronunciation marking the user as enemy is a device used at least four times since "Sibboleth" betrayed the Ephraimites. St. Bryce's Day, November 2, 1002, Saxons used "Chichester Church" as a test word; pronounced soft, the speaker was a Saxon and spared; if hard, he was a Dane and slain. In 1282 the French were massacred by Sicilians; the test was the word for dried peas. One pronouncing it "checkaree" satisfied the soldiers, that he was a Sicilian; if he said "siseri," he was known to be a Frenchman and was killed. In 1840 the Egyptians returned across the Jordan from a campaign to drive the Turks from their country. Resentful at being forced to help Egyptians, Syrians seized some of the Jordan fords and asked

those who crossed to pronounce the word for Camel: "Jamel." Egyptians have no soft "J" sound. When they answered "Gamel," like their prototypes among the Ephraimites, they were "slain at the passages of the Jordan." Still a third time was a test used at the Jordan. In the world war straggling Turks were met at the fords by the Syrians who demanded of those who would pass that they pronounce the Syrian word for onion. Those who said "buzzel" passed safely; those who said "bussel" were killed.

That forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at the passages of the Jordan is Improbable; forty, plus two thousand, is generally considered to be a much more likely figure. At least, the words are open to either construction.

"Shibboleth" is a word of many meanings, both Masonically and Biblically.

R.W. Charles C. Hunt, Librarian and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, Masonic student and authority, went to the Hebrew Bible for the use of the word, with the following interesting result:

"It appears in Zecharias 4:12, translated "Branch." Isaiah 27:12, translated "Channel." Genesis 41:5-6-7-22-23-24-26-27; Ruth 2:2; Job 24:24, translated "Corn" or "Ears of Corn." Psalms 69:15, translated "Water Flood."

Judges 12:6, not translated, as to do so would be to destroy the sense of the story in which it is used as a pass or test word.

In modern days "shibboleth" means (Standard Dictionary) "A test word or pet phrase of a party; a watchword." The example given is: "Opposition to internal improvements became a Democratic shibboleth," quoted from Harper's Monthly, July, 1892.

Masonically, Shibboleth means both a stream, and corn or wheat; so used, both are emblems of plenty.

"Corn" does not denote the familiar source of corn meal, familiar and dear to the American palate. Our corn is a cultivated descendant of "Indian Corn" or Maize, so called to distinguish it from European corn, which, prior to the discovery of America, was the term for wheat, barley and other grains. "Corn" is so used in the Old Testament, the principal grains of which are wheat and barley.

There is no unanimity of opinion as to what kind of a stream should be an emblem of plenty. For years a minor controversy has raged, as interesting as (apparently) it is unseizable.

Should the sheaf of wheat be suspended near a "waterfall" or a "waterford?"

The greatest American Masonic authority - many argue that on the whole the greatest Masonic authority of the world - is Albert Gallatin Mackey. He pronounced emphatically for "waterfall." Yet many learned authorities contend that Mackey was not infallible, and that he erred.

It is human to see our own ideas as correct, the other fellow's wrong. South Carolina, Mackey's state, uses "waterfall," Iowa and Colorado, among others, use "waterford;" Henry Evans, Editor of the "Square and Compass," of Denver, is a Colorado Mason; Charles Hunt, already quoted, is of the Grand Lodge of Iowa. The student, therefore, must judge which is correct by argument rather than by weight of authority which attaches to such names as Mackey, Hunt, Evans, etc.

The two following quotations, grave and dignified when considered alone, at least border on the humorous when read together. The first is from the Ahiman Rezon (Code and Monitor combined) of South Carolina:

"The passages of Scripture which are referred to in this part of the section will be found in Judges XII, 1-6. The vulgate version gives a paraphrastic translation of a part of the 6th verse, as follows: "Say. therefore, Shibboleth, which being interpreted is an 'Ear of corn.' The same word also in Hebrew signifies a rapid stream of water, from the root SHaBaL, to flow copiously. The too common error of speaking, in this part of the ritual, of a 'waterford' instead of a 'waterfall,' which is the correct word, must be carefully avoided. A 'waterfall' is an emblem of plenty, because it indicates an abundance of water. A 'waterford,' for converse reason, is, if any symbol at all, a symbol of scarcity."

Hear now the South Dakota (Monitor):

"Note - The common error of using the word 'waterfall' instead of 'waterford,' which is the correct one, must be carefully avoided. The word to which allusion is made in this part of the ritual signifies an ear of corn. Corn has never been used as an emblem of Plenty. The fall or the ford has nothing to do with it, except that it originated for the purposes used by us at the Fords of Jordan, and not at the falls. The same volume of water which passes over the falls may be found at the ford below."

At first sight the argument that the same volume of water passes over the ford as passes the falls seems unanswerable; some go further, saying that as a fall may not extend all the way across a river, more water "may" cross the ford than goes over the fall! To which those who argue on the other side submit that it is not a matter of gallons per minute, for either ford or fall, but the impression which fords and falls make upon the mind. Less water tumbles over Niagara than flows down the Mississippi, yet the torrential falls give a greater impression of quantity than the Father of Waters, peacefully and sluggishly moving in great but shallow width. According to those who argue for fall instead of ford, the former conveys the idea of plenty of water, while a ford, which can only exist where the water is shallow, argues a paucity of water: - "Fall of Water. - There is a certain emblem in the degree of Fellowcraft, which is said to derive its origin from the waters of the Jordan, which were held up while the Israelites passed over, and which would naturally fall with great violence when the whole host had reached the opposite shore." Oliver Dict.

“An ingenious explanation of a false emblem. The Jordan, it is true, is full of rapids and falls, and a waterfall may not be out of keeping in the emblem, yet a waterford has much more meaning, and waterfall is probably its corruption. The Jordan is fordable in places.”

The April 15, 1876, issue of the “Canadian Craftsman” contained the following:

“WATER-FALL OR WATER-FORD.”

“There is a dispute now going on among our brethren in the State of New York, which promises to afford scope for very a learned discussion during the next meeting of their Grand Lodge. The work as agreed upon by the Grand Lodge requires the use of the words ‘waterford’ in the lecture to the Second Degree, instead of ‘fall of water,’ and the ritual having thus been formally and authoritatively declared, every Lodge is required to conform to it, on pain of losing its Warrant if it disobeys. The old form ‘fall of water,’ however, has its partisans, and the controversy waxes somewhat warm. An effort is to be made at the next meeting of the Grand Lodge to reverse its decision, but we hardly think the effort will succeed. It is difficult to see upon what principle the term ‘fall of water’ can be used; ‘waterford’ is in every respect more correct.” It is to be noted that in New York the proper term is “still” “waterford.”

Certain Jurisdictions print the word they prefer in their Monitors; others indicate it with a picture; most consider it secret work and do not print anything about it. Colorado, Iowa, New York, South Dakota, Utah and Wisconsin are among those which suspend sheaves of wheat beside fords, while South Carolina, Florida, Delaware and the District of Columbia hang theirs beside a waterfall.

In September this year, the “Square and Compass” of Denver stated:

“Too often the word ‘waterfall’ is used to indicate the location where the sheaf of wheat was found. The proper indication is ‘waterford’ as showing an abundant flow of water affording ‘plenty’ of that necessary element in a dry country for the sustenance of man and beast, whereas a ‘waterfall’ would suppose a restricted amount of the precious drops, caught among the rocks of a fall, instead of being spread out over a thirsty land.”

Previously the “Illinois Freemason” stated: “A Waterford is not a symbol of plenty. The text should not read waterford , but instead waterfall. The oldest charts illustrate a waterfall, not a ford. Just how the substitution came to be made is one of those things which cannot be explained other than to say that somebody did some tinkering with the ritual.”

To which the “Masonic Chronicler” of Chicago retorted: “It is absurd to contend that a waterford is a symbol of plenty, neither can a waterfall have any such significance.”

It is true that many early charts show falls, not fords. But whether “the oldest charts” did so is a matter to be answered only by those who have seen them. “Very” old “Master’s Carpets” or “Trestleboards” of England show neither. Allyn’s Ritual (an Expos’) published 1831, uses

“ford.” Jeremy Cross’s “True Masonic Chart” shows neither. So that with authorities at odds on the question, “proof” becomes merely argument and opinion!

More space than the controversy is worth may well have been given it, yet so many ask the facts that it seems worth while to put the several contentions side by side.

More pertinent, perhaps, is the natural query; “Why should there be “any” symbol of plenty? Plenty of “what?”. And why emphasize it to the Fellowcraft?”

Here again authority may not speak, since all symbols of rich content have many meanings, not only one. Those who attempt to read from her wealth of symbols the inner, spiritual meaning of Freemasonry’s gentle teachings find no difficulty of meeting upon common ground that an ear of corn or sheaf of wheat suspended near a waterfall or waterford, are symbols of the “plenty” (all we need) of ethical teaching, moral value and spiritual inspiration, which he who hath eyes to see may discern in Freemasonry.

The Fellowcraft has come from darkness into light; he is now, Masonically, a man grown. He has climbed the Winding Stairs, and pauses before he approaches the Middle Chamber. Entry into that holy place is not a mere physical going into a room, but an ability to join mentally and spiritually in the search for the solution of the mystery there symbolized by the letter “G.” Freemasonry seems to cry with no uncertain voice. “Here, in what you have seen, is plenty - (all you require) - to read the mystery and know as much as man may know of the meaning of that letter which is the symbol of the Most High.

So read, the symbol becomes high and beautiful, and the controversy as to whether ford or fall is correct is of little consequence or worth. Happy the Fellowcraft who does, indeed, receive his “plenty” when he crosses the passages of the Jordan, learns the correct pronunciation of Shibboleth, and pauses into his Middle Chamber.

STB – December 1934