

THE ILLUSTRIOUS ORDER OF THE RED CROSS



The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is one of the oldest of all Masonic degrees. This Order is so venerated that it occurs in the Allied Masonic Degrees in England under the title of “Red Cross of Babylon” and it is featured in the Order of Knight Masons, the ne plus ultra of Irish Freemasonry. Furthermore, it appears as the 16th degree of the Scottish Rite system known as Prince of Jerusalem. We will have a brief look at the Order’s known history. We will then examine four of the symbols used in this sublime order: the journey, the bridge, the debate, and the sash & jewel.

We know that the Order of the Red Cross was being conferred in France in the 1760s. In his “Encyclopædia of Freemasonry” A. E. Waite mentions that this degree (under the form of Prince Mason) was the 33rd degree in the Early Grand Rite of Scotland, and an older revision of the Red Cross of Babylon. There is a claim that Passing the Bridge – the central section of the degree – was worked in an ‘Antient’ Lodge in Sunderland, England, as early as 1755. In the Baldwyn Rite of Bristol, England it is worked as the “Knight of the East, or Sword or Eagle”.

The conferral of this Order is usually split into three parts. In part 1 the Jewish Sanhedrin grieve the fact that their efforts to rebuild the City and Temple at Jerusalem are constantly thwarted, either by aggressive enemies or by indifferent edicts. They elect to send an ambassador to the Court of Darius to plead their case: Zerubbabel offers to go, as the King at Babylon knows him. In part 2, Zerubbabel attempts to cross a river by means of a bridge, but is arrested by guards and imprisoned. In part 3 he is brought before the King and his commitment to Truth and to his vows result in his being released and exalted. Following the famous debate, he is allowed to return to his native land with the promise of a free pass for him and his companions. Although the journey is sandwiched between two sections that appear to be more impressive, do not let this distract you. The journey is in fact the most important part of all!

According to the Book of Ezra, the meeting between Zerubbabel and Darius never took place: it was Tattenai and Sethar-bosnai, local governors, who reported the rebuilding of the Temple to Darius in a letter. Darius, after locating Cyrus’ original decree, endorses it and tells them to lend what aid they can to the enterprise. There is no indication of any communication between Zerubbabel and Darius. The historical lecture suggests that the Order is based upon a story by Josephus and the debate from the Apocryphal Book of 1ST Esdras, 4, where we learn of the debate, but not the identity of any of the debaters.

In the Holy Royal Arch, we learn that the name Zerubbabel signifies “Truth”; Zerubbabel therefore is the embodiment of this quality. It is ‘Truth’, therefore, which undertakes this extraordinary journey, traveling, it might be noted, from West, or Jerusalem to East, or Babylon, in a surprising reversal of the usual journeying which leads to the Holy City.

What is most important about this particular journey is that it is roundtrip. The immense significance of this will become apparent when we consider the fact that the journey involves crossing a bridge. In this sense, the bridge is like Jacob's ladder in the First Degree – it is a means of crossing a divide which separates two places. Much is written in the Book of Ezra about being 'over the river', 'this side of the river' and 'beyond the river'. Therefore, the river becomes a divider between two empires.

In the great religions of the world there is a tradition that the soul has to cross the river of death, usually over a bridge, but sometimes by ferry as in Greek mythology, or by dividing the waters as Elijah did before his translation. In all the Rites Crossing the Bridge is a symbolical representation of Death, while the subsequent experience of the candidate is emblematical of the judgment of the soul." The river has often been used as a symbol for the veil of forgetfulness or death, and its waters wash both cares and remembrances from the transitioning soul. The two lands represent the conscious and subconscious worlds. Truth, then, crosses the bridge between the earthly world and the celestial plane, there to be detected as an intruder because he only has the pass for "this side of the river".

According to legend, (From the Red Cross of Babylon) Zerubbabel was formerly well known to the King, and now offers his services to undertake the hazardous enterprise of traversing the Persian dominions, and seeking admission into the presence of King Darius. So, it appears that Truth was accustomed to crossing this bridge in the past in order to communicate with this 'King', but may have forgotten how to do it, which is why he is stopped, recognized as not belonging to that second world, and apprehended. However, on receiving an audience with the 'King' he is recognized and a final test is put to him. This test is one of determining that he understands the importance of silence and secrecy. Truth demonstrates his understanding and the 'King' now welcomes him as a friend.

Now we come to the great debate, in which three arbiters argue which is stronger; the power of wine, the power of the king, or the power of women. Even though Zerubbabel is given the task of arguing the strength of women, he comes to realize that only Truth can set him free. That is to say that the strength that we seek to build our Spiritual Temple lies within ourselves. Well pleased with this result, the 'King' asks him what he needs, and Zerubbabel reminds him of his vow. The King agrees to comply with his vow and also grants passports. This no casual gift, for Truth now has the ability to pass between the two lands without further hindrance. The King also restores his sash and sword and gives him words of power and signs to enable him to make the transition in future.

The color of the sash is green trimmed in red from which is suspended a crossed sword and trowel. The color red represents fervency & zeal. Green is the color of virtue and immortality. The crossed sword and trowel are symbolic of the legend that the operative masons who rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem worked with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.

Remember Sir Knights, Truth is Mighty and will Prevail.