

Biography of St. John the Baptist

From Trestleboard of Watuppa Lodge, AF&AM, Massachusetts, December, 1998

St. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, was a son of the Jewish priest Zacharias and of Elizabeth, who as a zealous judge of morality and undaunted preacher of repentance, obtained great celebrity, first in his native country, then in the mountains of Judea, and afterwards among the whole nation. His simple manner of living contributed much to his fame, and especially the peculiar purification or consecration by baptism in a river bath, which he introduced as a symbol of that moral purity which he so zealously inculcated.

Jesus allowed himself to be baptized by him, and from that time forward, John said unto his disciples that Jesus was certainly the Messiah. The frank earnestness and the great fame with which he preached even in Galilee soon brought upon him the suspicion and hatred of the court of Tetrarch Antipas, or King Herod, who imprisoned him, and on the 29th of August, in the thirty-second or thirty-third year of his life, caused him to be beheaded. The 24th of June, his birthday, is dedicated to his memory through all Christendom.

The patron saint of the Freemasons' brotherhood was formerly not St. John the Baptist, but St. John the Evangelist, whose festival they celebrated on the 27th of December, upon which day they held their general assembly, probably induced thereto because at this season of the year, the members could be better spared from their business or profession. For this reason, they chose for their quarterly festivals the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, Michaelmas, and the festival of St. John the Baptist, which last festival, on account of the better weather and other circumstances having been found to be more convenient for the yearly assembly, was often appointed for the time on which it should be held, so that it has now become nearly general. Many Lodges still celebrate the 27th of December and call it the minor St. John's day.

The title "John the Divine" designates him a theologian because of the quality of the Gospel.

The Beloved Disciple seemingly lived a long life and did not die a martyr (John 21:23), hence the tradition that John lived at Ephesus in Asia Minor until early in the reign of Trajan (98-117). Irenaeus has him confronting the heretic Cerinthus in the public baths there, perhaps a legendary recollection of the type of doctrinal conflict found in the Epistles of John. Tertullian says that John was taken from Ephesus to Rome and cast into a cauldron of boiling oil before the Latin Gate. Other ancient legends have him raising a dead man to life, reclaiming a robber for Christ, and constantly repeating in his old age, "Little children, love one another."

Of the four figurative representations of the evangelists based on Ezekiel 1: 10 and Revelation 4:7, John was depicted as an eagle because of the soaring theology of the Gospel prologue (1:1-18).

The Gospel of St. John the Evangelist is especially important to the Freemasons, for he preached love, and his book contains all the fundamental doctrines of Freemasonry. As a Freemason ought never to forget that he has laid his hand upon the Gospel of St. John, so should he never cease to love his Brethren according to the doctrine of love contained in that sacred book. Many Lodges celebrate his anniversary, the 27th of December.