

Just Where is it that We Meet

It deserves no prizes and would be discourteous to the intelligence of everyone present if I were to answer my own question with the most natural answer: in the hall wherever we happen to be. Though that is an instant and obvious reply to my query I think it will be of greater interest for all of us if I explain that what might seem self-evident is not what I am really intending to talk about. It even occurred to me that some of my Masonic Companions might find it of interest to appreciate the full significance of where it was that they usually met. The first feature to which I would direct your attention is the expanse above our heads. You will notice in many Lodge rooms that it is painted to represent the open sky and even where it is not so painted there is usually a symbol that signifies God the Grand Geometrician. This has its own special significance, since we owe at least part of our heritage to those craftsmen who worked very largely in the open air in constructing buildings. It was to help them do that, that they were provided with a shelter or lean-to (an allogemant or lodge) for some of their work in bad weather. Yet that is not the reason which applies to the kind of meeting that we are holding today. Today we are in a Chapter and not in a Lodge. Why then is there still the idea of the open air?

The answer is that one of the places where we Masons gather in a Chapter is the Wilderness of Sinai. We are companions on a journey which takes us first from the slave camps of Egypt, across the Red Sea and into the open vastness of the desert called Horeb. It is all very biblical, you see, but then that is why – in the Chapter just as much as in our Lodge meetings – you will observe that laid open before us is the Volume of the Sacred Writings that tell us of God's purposes for his people. Early in in that set of stories there were two journeys – one the journey of Abraham from Chaldea (modern Iraq) to Canaan (modern Palestine) and the other of Moses leading his fellow Hebrews from besides the Nile to 'the land of milk and honey' which was Israel. What you see laid out before you is part of what it must have looked like to those Hebrews as they camped each night in the course of that second journey from Egypt. Let me explain.

When Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees to the west he brought with him certain special information. He knew from the teachings of his ancestors that a divine power ruled the heavens and that this power revealed itself in the way that the stars were arranged in the sky. This is not the occasion for going into too great details about the science of astrology but let me assure you that the Babylonians had already, by Abraham's time, arranged the stars that they could see (without telescopes) in 12 distinct patterns and to each of these patterns they gave a name and a sign. They called that arrangement the Zodiac. If you wanted to know the season of the year, the year itself, the time to plant crops or the direction in which to travel to your destination, then all you had to do was to learn about the starry signs of the heavens and the science of the day would help you on your way. It was essential knowledge for pilgrims, traders, farmers or refugees. And what Abraham brought with him from Babylon was passed down to his son Isaac, and Isaac to Jacob and all his brothers. Indeed one of the last acts of Jacob before he died was to call all his sons before him and divide up the land of Israel between them. In doing so he chose twelve, and he gave each of them one of the signs that he and his father had learned from the sky knowledge that they brought from

Babylon. If you look in any modern Bible you will see a map showing how those sons and their tribes were spread out across the face of the land that we now know as Israel.

Moses had to learn that knowledge too and he received it not only from his later Jewish companions but even earlier at the court of Egypt. It was there that Babylonian students, including Pythagoras, had also come and shared what they knew about the secrets of the open sky. When Moses was appointed to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt he had of course to organise the exit (or Exodus as we now know it) so that everyone involved was cared for and protected. One of the ways he did this was to decide in which order the whole body of the people would move and camp. He decided to use the order of the stars as they had been handed down from Abraham and Isaac and every evening when the camp of Hebrews was set up there were three tribes placed in the north, three in the south and three each in the west and east. In this way everyone knew exactly where they were meant to be without constant direction and everyone also knew where the other travellers were. That arrangement into four sets of three tribes stands before you in the centre of our Chapter. The standards you see are not there by chance. If you were to compare the names on the standards with those set out in the wilderness of Sinai during the exodus you would find that they would be exactly the same. I think that that is what you truly call 'tradition'. Moreover, the lay-out of these standards tells us that, being under the open sky from which they first derived their meaning, we are gathered like the Hebrews in the wilderness.

I should also tell you that over 200 years ago there were other items that you would have seen in such a Chapter as this which would have even more convinced you that we were first gathered in the wilderness. Indeed, I have to inform the Companions that there are still some chapters today in which these items are still present. You would have seen the Burning Bush before which Moses was commanded to remove his shoes; a waving blue curtain or screen which represented the Red Sea; a stick with hidden joints so that it could be made to look like the snake used before Pharaoh; a pot of manna which reminded those present of how God fed the Hebrews in the desert; and a pot of incense which Aaron was to use in order to cleanse the people from plague. The breastplate of the High Priest, which also had 12 stones in it relating to the stars in the sky, also used to be worn by one of the Principals, as is still the case in at least 2 Chapters in Yorkshire.

Even though we have removed most of these items today the standards still remain as also do the principal banners of the Army of the Hebrews – the Lion, the Man, the Ox and the Eagle. And if anyone still wonders why the lectern in a church resembles an eagle it is because the Christians, starting as a Jewish community, adopted these four creatures for the great Gospel writers with John the Evangelist represented by an eagle. You may also like to know that the three principal officers in a Chapter first used to represent Moses, Aholiab and Bezaleel, who shared the creation of the Tabernacle or Sanctuary – which is the place where we meet today.

It was not enough, you see, for the Hebrews simply to know that they had a God who cared for them. They also wanted to worship Him. That is why Moses used the other knowledge that he had from his Egyptian days and constructed a moving temple that could go with them on their travels. The tools he used to plan and construct this Tabernacle were the square and compasses, the pick to loosen the earth, the crowbar to remove boulders and the shovel to help fix and make firm the posts and pegs. The rope would be what the skirret was in later days, the means for establishing the boundaries of the sacred area. All these were tools with operative uses, whatever other more sacred

or moral meanings might be found for them. And the surest current sign that we are in the presence of a holy place is that there before our eyes is a pillar of white material – originally marble – on which a bowl of incense would once have burned, as indeed it is seen to do in a lovely picture in Perth. What you see there is King James VI of Scotland standing by such an altar of incense as he fulfils his masonic progress. Such an altar was part of the first chamber of that wilderness Tabernacle which Moses caused to be constructed and in our Chapters of old you would have seen also the piles of shewbread and the seven-branched candlestick which were part and parcel of that sacred shrine where we still meet. What would also have convinced you that this was our gathering-place would have been the three veils that hung across the room – one of blue, one of purple and one of crimson – for these were the reminder that we were approaching the Holy of Holies itself, the very heart of the desert Tabernacle. Today we only the reminder of those veils in the colours of our Principals' robes but even so they are sufficient to tell us 'just where it is that we meet'. To recall us further as to where Masons were then gathered the old Chapters had a huge Arch standing over the Ark of the Covenant – that most sacred of all the Hebrew objects which today only appears on the certificates that each Companion is entitled to receive.

Yet many of those present know that this is not the whole sum of 'just where we meet' today. I have drawn your attention to the fact that the first place of meeting was connected with the Jewish people returning from their exile in Egypt. That was not the only exile that the Bible speaks of for some centuries later the rulers of Babylon came again to Israel and removed the Jewish leaders and their families to Nineveh – indeed to almost the very countryside from which Abraham had first started his epic journey. There the Jewish exiles and their first descendants resided until the Persian conquest of Babylon and Assyria led to the Jewish residents being allowed to return to their native land if they so desired. Their principal leader from exile was Zerubbabel the Prince and seated with him in our Chapters to this day are Haggai the Prophet who foretold this return, and Joshua the High Priest who helped to restore the worship at Jerusalem. You see them with us now in the east of the Chapter.

Also in this place where we meet are Ezra the Scribe and Nehemiah, the re-builder of walls of Jerusalem, and they, with all the other Companions, form the governing body of the Jewish community. This was the Sanhedrim of seventy members, which gathered in one of the courts around the Holy Place of the Temple that had to be re-built. We know that we are in the precincts of the Temple because the floor of the sanctuary is black and white, the traditional colour given to the floor of the Temple in every Bible picture from the time that Bibles were first illustrated or printed. And those illustrators got their ideas from buildings that already had shrines with such floors. That is why you will see black and white squared floors if you visit places as far apart as the Norman chapel of the Castle at Durham or the court of the mosque in the Alcazar of Malaga in Southern Spain. The setting of the same altar of incense upon that sort of floor here confirms that we are gathered in a place like a Temple in Jerusalem. Here again are the implements that helped to reconstruct it, including the sword and the trowel. The sword was to keep off all those who wanted to stop the Jews re-building their Temple and the trowel to complete the pointing and smoothing of the walls.

And there is just one more thing. What of the rope that lies on the floor of the Holy Place? When the Temple was again completed, and the Holy of Holies was again in place, the rope returned to its previous and remarkable use. Only the High Priest was allowed into the Holy Place and then only once a year. It was a room that was completely dark, even though the Ark of the Covenant was set

within it. Because the High Priest had to be in a state of perfect purity which would be destroyed if he were to die or be affected with illness during his time in the chamber the rope was secured round his waist and the two ends held by the other priests outside the chamber. In this way they could draw him out of the sacred precinct should anything untoward occur whilst of course not themselves trespassing upon the forbidden space of the Holy of Holies. The real source of some of our own present ceremonies may now begin to be revealed to my Companions here.

These then are the three locations in which we find ourselves today – in the wastes of Sinai, within the tabernacle and around the Temple of Jerusalem. In each case we are in sacred territory and bound on the Lord's business. That is why I always count it a privilege to be here and why it is a special joy to introduce you to our meeting place.