

POSSIBLE JEWISH ANTECEDENTS OF FREEMASONRY

by Graham Murray

We are speculative, as opposed to operative, Masons. This paper is in itself speculative as its very title implies. The central motif of Masonry and many of the associated Orders is King Solomon's Temple, which is also a central motif of Judaism. However, Craft Masonry is neither a Christian nor a Jewish organisation, yet King Solomon's Temple lies at its heart. This paradox is central to this paper: how the particularly Jewish concept of King Solomon's Temple came to be the core of modern speculative Masonry. The title of this paper describes the argument fully: it posits a Jewish ancestry to the Craft and speculates on when this link had its genesis.

Freemasonry is an integral part of western civilisation. Its power for good has been enormous; likewise its vilification. Masonry stands for brotherly love, relief and truth, words that amply describe normative Judaism.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are three blocks of material requiring examination: the Tetrateuch; the Deuteronomic History; and the post-exilic work of the Chronicler. All of these sections of the Hebrew Scriptures detail the building of contemporary Jewish houses of God: the Tabernacle, and King Solomon's Temple.

During the 19th century CE a new approach to Biblical studies began. As rationalism spread, the Hebrew Scriptures underwent intensive study. This study led to the formation of the *Documentary Hypothesis* (sometimes called the *Wellhausen Hypothesis*, after the German scholar who first mooted the theory). This hypothesis posits that the Pentateuch, rather than being written by Moses, was in fact the product of four different and independent documents.

The term Pentateuch (Greek for *five scrolls*) refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, commonly referred to as 'The Law'. However, 'the teaching' is probably a better translation of the Hebrew term *Torah*. The Documentary Hypothesis (which is still held by the vast majority of Old Testament scholars) posits four sources for five books: the *Jahwist* (*J*); the *Elohist* (*E*); the *Deuteronomist* (*D*); and the *Priestly* (*P*).

The Deuteronomist is a unique source in that it encompasses virtually the whole of the book of Deuteronomy and is related to the succeeding Deuteronomic History, found in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. In fact, Deuteronomy acts as an introduction to the Deuteronomic History. The term 'history' is misleading, for the Deuteronomic History is in reality political propaganda, explaining why YHWH seemed to desert Israel/Judah.

This leaves us with the first four books of the Hebrew Scriptures that are generally known as the Tetrateuch (meaning *four scrolls*). These books are composed of the other three sources: Jahwist, Elohist, and Priestly. The Jahwist and the Elohist are what remains of the national epics of Judah (in the case of the Jahwist) and Israel (in the case of the Elohist), while the Priestly Source is the most recent, composed during the exile in Babylon of Judah's elite (*circa* fifth century BCE). It is this later source that is of interest in the discussions of Solomon's Temple in Judaism and later speculative Freemasonry.

A large part of the Priestly writing refers to the Tabernacle, a somewhat portable temple to YHWH that the Israelites are supposed to have built for themselves while wandering in the wilderness. This Tabernacle was the alleged forerunner of King Solomon's Temple. Although it is possible that, prior

to their settlement in Canaan, the wandering Israelites (if indeed they wandered) had some form of cultic shrine, it is highly unlikely to have been that of a tent-temple as elaborate as the later sections of the book of Exodus describe. What the Priestly author has done is to project the pre-exilic Temple of Solomon back to before the settlement (and/or invasion) of Canaan.

J and *E* refer to a basic sanctuary tent similar to that used by desert Bedouin nomads.¹ The description of splendour described in the Priestly source gives the impression of a settled and civilised society.² Even if we accept the premise of the ‘flight’ from Egypt, this is a description that does not apply to the raggle-taggle band of refugees that Moses supposedly led; Exodus 12:37 gives a figure of 600,000 males, in addition to women and children, which is a blatant and obvious exaggeration. There are no extant Egyptian documents referring to the exodus event, and it should be noted that slavery was rare in Egypt. As for an exodus of a million-plus people, this implies that for every two to three Egyptians there was one or more Hebrew ‘slaves’. As the book of Exodus reached its final form in the Diaspora, in Babylon, some 1000 years after the alleged event, this number could be a reflection of the population of Israel/Judah at the height of Solomon’s Empire.

The historicity of the exodus is open to doubt. Soggin³ gives an up to date critical view of the exodus event that has been heavily influenced by Garbini.⁴ This posits that the history of Israel/Judah, as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, is in the form of a doctrinal tract, written and redacted by the Priestly school of writing during the Babylonian exile of the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. When the book of Exodus was finally redacted, it drew upon tribal traditions and not historical sources. The theological purpose of the book (as part of the Tetrateuch) was to prepare the Judean exiles in Babylon for their return to the lands later known as Palestine and Israel.

Clearly the evidence for the Tabernacle is slender to the point of non-existence. The Tabernacle was a concoction of the Priestly Source to allow for the continued presence of YHWH in the organised Hebrew community. A new exodus was about to begin and the priestly caste wished to make this exodus back to Jerusalem a resounding success. All 613 laws that the rabbis later created from the Pentateuch had their origin in Babylon and were the legal basis for a theocratic state (under Persian suzerainty) to be established in what was once the land of Canaan.

Even before the disastrous revolts against Rome in the first and second centuries CE, Judaism was well established outside Israel/Palestine. This enabled it still to evolve and exist throughout the Roman Empire. Jews, generally, were considered a *religio licita* (a religion recognised by Rome as lawful) and, because of their beliefs, they did not have to participate in the official cult of emperor-worship, which basically involved placing a pinch of incense on an altar and declaring that ‘Caesar is Lord’. After the revolts they became even more scattered but were held together by their Scriptures, the canon of which was only formulated at the Council of Jamnia (*circa* 100 CE), as well as their traditions and synagogues.

Things were, however, to change. In 312 CE, Constantine defeated his rival, Maxentius, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and became the Western Roman Emperor. By 324 he was sole ruler of the empire. He was also a Christian.

In 391 CE, Christianity became the official state-supported religion of the Roman Empire⁵ and, with paganism now suppressed, a nightmare for the Jewish people began. By 391 the Church had developed a theology of anti-Semitism. However, there was an amelioration of this condition from time to time and Jews did and could prosper.

¹ Craghan, John F: *Exodus*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1985, p 75.

² Bourke, Myles M: *The book of Exodus*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1968, p79.

³ Soggin, J Alberto: *An introduction to the history of Israel and Judah*, SCM, London 1993, ch 7.

⁴ Garbini, G: *History and ideology in ancient Israel*, SCM, London 1988.

⁵ Kinder, H & Hilgeman, W: *The Penguin atlas of world history*, vol 1, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974, p 103.

Because of its exclusivity and particularism, Judaism survived, but at a price: massacres, expulsions, forced conversions and pogroms. Spain had a sophisticated and literate Jewish population which, by the time of the Merovingian monarchs north of the Pyrenees Mountains, began to make inroads into what is now France, Belgium, Holland and the western part of Germany. By Carolingian times (751–814 CE), they were welcome and prospered in these areas.

A building requires architects as well as masons; this is especially so in a larger building, such as a cathedral. There were separate guilds of architects as well as masons.⁶ Medieval architecture flowered after a long hiatus following the collapse of the western Roman empire. By the time of the Carolingian renaissance of the ninth century CE (not to be confused with the general western renaissance of the 13th to 15th centuries CE) the western emperor, Charlemagne, was devoting great resources to learning. At this time the concept of large, public (mainly religious) buildings began once more.

Jewry flourished in Carolingian Europe. Various inducements were made for Jews to settle and they received a great deal of imperial protection and, significantly, were allowed to build synagogues.⁷ Presumably no Christian artisan would want to design a synagogue, so there was a need for Jewish architects. As the size of ecclesiastical buildings increased, there was a greater need for the employment of architectural skills. As well as having skilled architects, the Jewish community was a primary source of finance for building projects, because Christians could not lend money at interest, whereas Jews could—but only to Gentiles.⁸

Even with imperial protection, the Jews of western Europe still suffered from problems ranging from manhandling to massacre. It was, therefore, important that their financial investments be as secure as possible, and this led ineluctably to Judaism becoming tangentially related to the operative masons.

The central question is to how a specifically Jewish motif such as King Solomon's Temple was transferred to Christianity. The majority of buildings of this period were churches and cathedrals: in effect, Christian versions of King Solomon's Temple. Builders of churches and cathedrals were, in effect, building a bethel, or house, for the Great Architect.

Some two hundred years after the flourishing of the Carolingian renaissance, William, the bastard Duke of Normandy, conquered England in 1066 CE, being crowned king on Christmas Day. The England of King Harold was societally primitive compared with Normandy. With a new king and a growing aristocracy, there was work aplenty for operative masons, much of this work being ecclesiastical in character.

We are reasonably confident that, in some way, speculative Masonry derived from operative masonry and that has been elaborated on elsewhere at great length. Alternatives do occasionally appear, a recent theory positing the development of speculative Masonry from the Knights Templar.⁹ However, the nexus between operative and speculative Masonry seems to be the most appropriate theory that accounts for the known facts.¹⁰

At the invitation of William the Conqueror, the Jews entered England. This measure was to be reversed in 1290 by their expulsion,¹¹ but that period of two hundred years saw the foundations of operative masonry in England being funded by money from Jewish bankers. Indeed, this was the

⁶ *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1993, vol 5, p 549.

⁷ Johnson, Paul: *A history of the Jews*, Phoenix, London 1987, p 205.

⁸ op cit, p 173.

⁹ Robinson, John J: *Born in blood*, Arrow, London 1989, *passim*.

¹⁰ *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol 4, p 966.

¹¹ Dimont, Max I: *Jews, God and history*, Mentor, New York 1994, p 230.

reason for William the Conqueror's invitation to the Jews, the funding of government and ecclesiastical building projects.

The nexus between the Jewish motif of King Solomon's Temple and English operative masonry lies in the permeation of Jewish thought into western architecture. The Hebrew Scriptures—Law, Prophets, Writings—are replete with references to the Temple and its alleged predecessor, the Tabernacle. By the time of the Norman Conquest there was the beginning of the system of craft guilds that was to flourish in the 14th and 15th centuries CE. There were guilds of both architects and masons. As it was the masons (who were Christians) who did the actual work of building, it would be surprising if they did not absorb the Temple motif, for were they not themselves building a bethel, a temple, a house for the Great Architect of the Universe?

To reiterate: the title of this paper begins with the word 'possible'. The thesis I have put forward has little substantive evidence but, as we all know, substantive evidence regarding the change from operative to speculative Masonry is also extremely rare.

Pick and Knight¹² mention that during the reign of William the Conqueror some 5000 churches were built in England, all of a basic similar pattern which differed sharply, architecturally, from Saxon churches built before the Norman Conquest of 1066 CE. This is evidence of centralised planning. This mass production, especially in the case of parish churches rather than cathedrals, illustrates that there was a single, basic source for their architecture. This is, therefore, indicative of a single and separate school of architectural design, as opposed to the many operative groups that existed.

In a synagogue, corresponding to the Holy of Holies in King Solomon's Temple, were kept the Scrolls of the Torah. In a church of that time, the space corresponding to the Holy of Holies was the high altar whereupon the Sacrifice of the Mass was enacted.

The evidential trail is thus:

- Jewish influences in Merovingian and Carolingian (and therefore western European) architecture;
- Invitation by the Conqueror to Jewish bankers and artisans;
- An enormous building programme and, most importantly, an architecture permeated by Judaism.

By the very nature of the work being financed and designed by Jews, the motif of King Solomon's Temple was absorbed by operative masonry and eventually expanded when speculative Masonry surfaced during the 17th and 18th centuries CE. This evidence is fragmentary and flimsy, but I reiterate that this is a highly speculative theory. A possible sequence of events has been posited and we can have a fresh look at our origins. The transfer of the Temple motif to a gentile organisation is a central part of Masonic research; much work needs to be done on this theme.

It is no secret that the practices of speculative Masonry drew much inspiration from the medieval mystical lore found in the Kabala, a complex system of Jewish mysticism. As with all trades in the Middle Ages, the work of operative masons had its own fair share of superstition and ritual. On to that base was to be built an edifice of Jewish mystical lore, eventually bringing us to the speculative Masonry of today.

The second important block of Biblical material is that of the Deuteronomic History comprising the books of Deuteronomy (which is the History's introduction), Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. The 'history' is in reality a lengthy theological tract that existed in a primitive form by the time of the prophet Jeremiah (*circa* 5th–6th centuries BCE). Following the fall of Jerusalem (the capital of the

¹² Pick, Fred L & Knight, G Norman: *The pocket history of Freemasonry*, Random House, London 1992, p 19.

southern kingdom, Judah), the Judean elite were, according to Neo-Babylonian custom, deported to Babylon proper:

In Babylon the Priestly authors redacted the Deuteronomic History (as with the Torah) into a theological justification of the history of Judah and Israel, the northern Kingdom, Israel, having fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The Deuteronomic History includes, of course, the building of the Temple by King Solomon while the two kingdoms were still united.

King Solomon's Temple was a dwelling place of YHWH. De Winter¹³ has touched upon the Temple being of Canaanite function and design. It must be remembered that at the time of building the Temple, Israel was a henotheistic society. The concept of monotheism was not determined until the Exile, during the time of Nebuchadnezzar II and his Persian successors. There was nothing overly spectacular about the Temple and, after the divorce of Israel and Judah, some Judaen Kings adapted it to gods other than YHWH and his consort.

Prior to the fall of Jerusalem *circa* 586 BCE, the Ark of the Covenant was viewed as the Seat of YHWH within Judah. The Ark was kept in the smallest part of King Solomon's Temple, known as the Holy of Holies. Likewise the medieval (and contemporary) Catholic belief in the Real Presence, wherein the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ reside within the consecrated host was (and is) kept in a 'Tabernacle' at the centre of the High Altar. Thus churches and cathedrals were literal houses of God, as was King Solomon's Temple. This could not have been completely lost on the operative masons of the time: ecclesiastical buildings were the natural successors to King Solomon's Temple.

The Temple was built during the tenth century BCE and was destroyed when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar; presumably the Ark of the Covenant, along with rest of its golden appurtenances, went to Babylon. Although some of this golden hardware came back at the time of the Restoration (*circa* 450 BCE), the Ark seems to have vanished, although the Deuterocanonical book of II Maccabees tells of Jeremiah hiding it in a cave.¹⁴

The Deuteronomic History tells of the building, use and destruction of King Solomon's Temple.

The third block of biblical material to be looked at covers the rebuilding and rededication of the Temple. This is the story of the Chronicler. It is the consensus of belief that the books of I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were the work of a single person or 'school', termed the Chronicler.¹⁵ This work, amongst other things, details the return of the exiles from Babylon, following its conquest by the Persians, and the rebuilding of the Temple, thus inaugurating the Second Temple Period that was to last until the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record not only the rebuilding of King Solomon's Temple but also the very birth of Judaism. By this time (*circa* 5th century BCE) the Torah and most of the Prophets had been finally redacted into their present form. It was at the council of Jamnia (*circa* 100 CE) that the 'Writings' were finally chosen and the Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, as we know it, was completed. The Torah was (and is) the centrepiece of Judaism, and this was publicly proclaimed by Ezra in a partially rebuilt Jerusalem.

The Second Temple motif is of importance to Royal Arch Masonry, whereas the King Solomon's Temple motif is central to Craft Masonry. Therefore it is necessary for this paper to concentrate on the building of the First (King Solomon's) Temple. The Deuteronomic History is thus our principal

¹³ De Winter, A: 'The Canaanite origins of King Solomon's Temple' in *Masonic Research in South Australia*, vol 1, SA Lodge of Research 216, Port Elliot 1995.

¹⁴ II Maccabees 2:5.

¹⁵ Soggin, J Alberto: *Introduction to the Old Testament*, SCM, London 1989, p 490.

source of information. The Chroniclers' work also refers to this Nebuchadnezzar but its information is derived mainly from the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic History.

The account of the building is found in I Kings, chapters 5–8. In keeping with the theology of the Deuteronomic History, whereby YHWH either rewards or punishes Israel depending on its 'faithfulness' to him, Solomon is warned that if Israel is unfaithful then the Temple will be destroyed.¹⁶ This was, of course, written in hindsight as the document was being redacted in Babylon.

Even at and before the time of its destruction, there was a tendency to lessen the Temple's importance in proto-Judaism (see Jeremiah, ch 7).¹⁷ Thus begun the process that was to lead to the synagogue, the mainstay of contemporary Judaism. An entry in *Collins Gem Encyclopaedia* is revealing:

Synagogue is a house of Worship and centre of Jewish education and communal affairs. Rabbi is spiritual leader, teacher and interpreter of Jewish law. Each congregation chooses its own rabbi. There is no world leader and no ruling body with authority over practice.

Present day Masonry could perhaps learn from this concept.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans was complete. In 135 CE there was another revolt, led by Simon bar Kochba (which translates as 'Son of the Star'). This led to the utter destruction of Jerusalem, with the Romans renaming what was left *Aelia Capitolina*, dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter, with access to Jews barred on pain of death.¹⁸ The Temple was no more.

Any attempts to link modern Speculative Freemasonry with Judaism must centre on King Solomon's Temple, the central motif of both. Speculative Masonry derives (we are reasonably sure) from operative masonry, and operative masonry drew on an architectural heritage that was anchored in a medieval Jewish milieu. We are the guardians and inheritors of that milieu and those traditions. As did our predecessors, we carry the torch, but it is an eternal flame, our motto being 'Knowledge is Light'.

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¹⁶ I Kings 9:8.

¹⁷ *vide* Jeremiah, ch 7.

¹⁸ Soggin, J Alberto: *An introduction to the history of Israel and Judah*, p 363.

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