

Introduction to the Banner Presentation

Companions

We as Freemasons probably appreciate the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Volume of the Sacred Law more than any other people. However, what we frequently miss is the historical importance of the Bible.

Now there may well be Companions here who know much more about the Old Testament than we do, however, from a historical standpoint, we understand that Abraham married Sarah and their son was Isaac who married Rebecca. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob [Esau married and founded the Arab Nation]; Jacob married Leah, Rachael, Billhah and Zilpah. Jacob, who was later renamed Israel [hence we have the land of Israel], had twelve sons and one [or more] daughters. Ten of his Sons formed ten of the twelve tribes of Israel and are represented by ten of the banners, or ensigns, in our Chapter. The other two tribes were formed by Manasseh and Ephraim, who were Jacob's grandsons by his son Joseph. This therefore leaves the twelfth son Levi, whose name you will see attached to Simon's banner in the temple layout at the front of your ritual book.

Now as you will hear later as we explain their banner, Levi, and indeed Simeon also with him, were a rather barbarous and nasty pair. For this reason, Jacob decreed that Simeon and his descendants should own very little possessions and live inside Judah's land and that Levi and his descendants should own no land at all and be dispersed throughout all the tribes in the promised land, furthermore, to prevent them from causing any more mischief, they and their descendants were to devote all their lives to priestly duties. From Levi therefore descended both the High Priest Aaron and the self-proclaimed leader Moses, from who both Judaism and Christianity have inherited the Ten Commandments. From Levi and Aaron also descended the present day tribe of "Cohen" [Cohenim or Priests].

When the Israelites marched through the wilderness, the twelve tribes had between them the four principal banners or standards, every one of which had a distinct sign inscribed upon it. The tribes encamped around the Tabernacle were: on the East three namely Judah, Issachar and Zebulon, under the Standard of Judah [a lion]; on the south three, namely Reuben, Simeon and Gad, under the banner of Reuben [a man]; on the west three: namely Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin, under the standard of Ephraim [an ox]; and on the north three, namely Dan Asher and Naphtali, under the standard of Dan [an eagle].

The ensigns which you see on the staves were the distinctive banners of the twelve tribes of Israel and figurative of the peculiar blessing bequeathed to each by the Patriarch Jacob who, before his death assembled them together for that purpose.

Judah

The banner of Judah was borne by Nashan, its prince. It was designated by a lion couchant surmounted by a crown and sceptre. Judah was the chief tribe, and was eminently distinguished for prosperity in war and for peace and quietness at home. Its dignity was marked by the divine favour in choosing David from this tribe to be the instrument of his blessing to the people of Israel. To the tribe of Judah was assigned the most honourable station in the camp, in the east, before the entrance to the Tabernacle, and under its standard the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun pitched their tents. The colour of this banner was crimson or scarlet.



Issachar

The banner of Issachar was borne by the standard-bearer of Prince Nathaniel. It was sky-blue and was charged with a strong ass couching beneath its burden. Some say it bore a sun and a moon and the Rabbis are inclined to this opinion. The ass is a patient animal and a proper symbol of labour and, accordingly the posterity of Issaquah sat down quietly on the land allotted to them and cultivated it with diligence and assiduity. Instead of employing themselves in war or mercantile pursuits they were lovers of peace and quietness. The act of the ass couching between its burdens was an appropriate symbol of the indolent character of this tribe, who preferred to submit to every species of tyranny and oppression rather than trouble to assert their natural rights in the field of battle. They were thus like the ass which, though a strong and hardy animal, would rather sink tamely under the heaviest load than shake it off by an exertion of its bodily powers.



Zebulun

Prince Eliab erected the banner of Zebulun. It was purple and bore for its distinguishing characteristic a ship. This referred to the prophecy of Jacob in the Book of Genesis, which said "Zebulun shall dwell at the haven of the sea, and he shall be for a haven of ships and his border shall be unto Sidon".



[Spoken by the DC] The next honourable post, on the south side of the camp, was occupied by Reuben, Simeon and Gad.

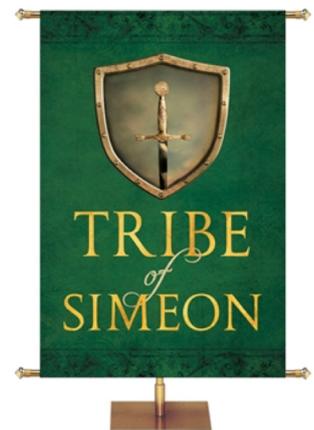
Reuben

The device of the great banner of Reuben, which was borne by Prince Elizur, was another of the cherubic forms, namely a man, because he was the first-born of his father. He was designated by Jacob as the “excellence of dignity and the excellence of power”. These epithets may refer in general to the prerogatives of the first-born, which Reuben would most certainly have enjoyed, accordingly to his just claim, if he had not forfeited it by his misbehaviour with the father’s concubine. His father therefore predicted of him “unstable as water, though shall not excel” and then mentions the reason why, namely; that as water by a natural propensity inherent in its substance flows downhill, so should Reuben fall from his birth right and subside into an inferior situation among the tribes. And the prophecy was remarkably verified: for nothing great or praiseworthy has been recorded respecting the posterity of Reuben. They were inferior in numbers to the other tribes and the pre-eminence was given to Judah.



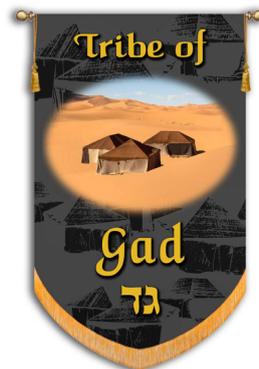
Simeon & Levi

Prince Shelumiel, as the leader of the tribe of Simeon, bore a yellow banner emblazoned with a sword. Some say Simeon’s banner was emblazoned with a city, others with a tower. Simeon and Levi were represented by instruments of war, the former by a sword the latter by a dagger, in allusion to the abhorrence shown by the dying patriarch to the cruelty of these two sons who had carried out the barbarous murder of the Shechemites, contrary to their assurance of kindness and good faith. Their father therefore said: “Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce and their wrath for it was cruel. I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel”. Having associated in wickedness, it was ordained by a superintending Providence that their posterity should be disunited so that they might not be furnished with an opportunity of working evil upon their Brethren as their progenitors had upon the people of Shechem. Hence the tribe of Simeon has little or no possessions in the Promised Land but dwelt in the midst of Judah: some wandered in search of a dwelling place as far as Mount Seir and the deserts of Gideon. As for the tribe of Levi it was entirely dispersed among the other tribes and devoted exclusively to the service of the altar.



Gad

The banner of the tribe of Gad was under the charge of Prince Eliasaph. It was white and was emblazoned with a troop of horsemen. Gad signifies a troop of horsemen and it is in allusion to the name, that Jacob foretold the difficulties that would be opposed to the progress of his posterity by the hostility of their neighbours. But though they were doomed to be sometimes defeated, yet in the end, by Divine assistance they would overcome all difficulties and establish themselves firmly and peaceably in the portion allotted to them; this prophecy was fulfilled to the letter, for the tribe which occupied a country beyond the Jordan were necessarily exposed to the incursions of the Ammonites, from whom they suffered severely. But at length, through the military talents of Jephthah, the Ammonites were finally subdued and troubled them no more.



[Spoken by the DC] The third or west side of the camp was occupied by the half tribe of Ephraim united with those of Manasseh and Benjamin.

Ephraim

Ephraim stepped into the inheritance of his father Joseph and was elevated to one of the leading tribes of Israel. His green banner, borne by Prince Elisham was consecrated with the figure of a cherubic emblem of the Deity, namely an ox, which denoted patient industry and strength. Thus God said "Ephraim is the strength of mine head".



Manasseh

Prince Gamaliel led the tribe of Manasseh: their tents were pitched under a flesh-coloured banner, which was charged with a luxuriant vine, planted by the side of a wall, which its tendrils were overhung. Some give this banner a unicorn and others a palm-tree. "Joseph is a fruitful bough growing by well-watered soil and shooting forth two luxurious branches." This referred to the tribes Ephraim and Manasseh and the prediction was fulfilled by their future pre-eminence. Of Joseph it was said "the archers sorely grieved him and shot at him and hated him", which referred to the persecutions of his Brethren who sold him into Egypt and to the false accusations by which he was thrown into prison. But "his bow abode in strength and the arms of his hands were made strong by the mighty God of Jacob" as his enemies were termed archers, so he is said to be armed with a bow in his own defence, by which he triumphed over his enemies and rose to the highest state of worldly prosperity.



Benjamin

The tribe of Benjamin, represented by Prince Avidan, was designed by a green banner, emblazoned with a wolf, because it was over a warlike and cruel tribe. It was predicted “Benjamin shall raven as a wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil”. Though Benjamin was a great favourite with Jacob, being his youngest son, yet Jacob conferred no peculiar blessings upon him but describes him as the father of a fierce and warlike people. This is an evident proof that Jacob acted under the influence of Divine inspiration. The tribe accordingly partook of the character thus predicted; they made war single handed against all the other tribes and overcame them in battle. Saul, who was also sprang from this tribe, possessed great military talents. His whole life was spent in war and at length he, as well as his sons, was slain in battle.



[Spoken by the DC] The fourth and last quarter of the camp, on the north side was assigned to Dan with whom were associated the two remaining tribes, Asher and Napthali.

Dan

The tribe of Dan was the largest next to Judah and it was for this reason, probably, that it was placed in the rear. The great banner was borne by Prince Ahiezer. It was of bright green in colour and charged with an eagle, a component part of the cherubim, denoting wisdom and subtlety; some give to Dan a banner with the device of a serpent biting the heel of a horse; some, an eagle bearing a serpent in its talons; others, a serpent only: one author thinks Dan's standard bore a lion's whelp. The name of Dan signifies judging and therefore Jacob said “Dan shall judge his people”, or in other words that the tribe should be the head of one of the great divisions in the Wilderness. He said further “Dan shall be a serpent by the way” and the tribe of Dan was remarkable for defeating its enemies rather by policy than force, of which there are many instances in the Bible. The tribe of Dan however, were ringleaders of idolatry, and were the first who apostatized from God.



Asher

Prince Pagiel unfurled the banner of Asher, which bore a flourishing tree or a cup. Its colour was purple. The tribe of Asher was promised a tract in the Holy Land which should be fruitful and prolific. In due course they were allotted such land, which produced the necessities of life in abundance, and Mount Carmel abounded in the choicest fruits.



Naphtali

The banner of Naphtali was borne by Prince Ahira and was designed by a hind. Its colour was blue. "Naphtali is a hind let loose: he given goodly words". This prophecy denotes that the posterity of Naphtali should be a spirited and free people and that the tribe should be fruitful and undergo a prodigious increase. Thus from four sons, whom Naphtali brought with him into Egypt, were descended upwards of fifty thousand descendants when they were emancipated from their captivity. Their portion was in Upper Galilee, a country always noted for its productiveness soil. This agreed with the blessing given to the tribe of Moses: "O Naphtali, satisfied with favour, and full with the blessing of the Lodge".



[Spoken by DC]

Thus Companions we review the various Tribes, their positions, activities and usefulness around the Tabernacle and symbolise the banners in our Chapters as articles of equipment.

The fact that the highest degree or order of constitutional Freemasonry adopts these Banners as part of their symbolism tempts us to extend the speculation as to what may be learned from them.

Very obviously the first lesson is that of organisation. In the worlds greatest movements there are those who are qualified to go first, others occupying an intermediate position, and then there are those who are left in the rear. There is a general anxiety amongst men to be in the front and a greater anxiety to emerge from the rear but, it is not to be supposed that the one is honourable of necessity, or the other dishonourable.

The three tribes under Dan had the rear in its special charge, here were to be found the ambulance wagons, the sick and wounded the camp followers, the women, old men and children. Who shall say that Dan's position in the rear was not an honourable commission?

Freemasonry then in its highest degree teaches us a valuable lesson that God has appointed each of us, his place, in the social system and that no man is dishonoured in whatever station he finds himself.

Privilege carries with it great responsibilities and, distinction often involves danger. If Judah was in front he was not there for the sake of gratifying his own pride or accepting the applause of the crowd. He was there an an instrument of Divine Favour.

This, or something corresponding, is the lesson for all whom God has placed in the front, whether it be the possession of wealth, or of learning, or of enterprise or any ability; these gifts are not for selfish men.

Each and everyone has been destined by the great "I am" to play our part in the great scheme of life which he directs. Our Order has the honour to show forth to the world the glory, power and importance of His Omnipotent will.

And, may we be so guided by his precepts, and guided by the maxims of our order, and never deviate from the paths of Honour and Virtue.