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The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is one of the oldest of all the Masonic Degrees. Elements of its ritual were practiced in Ancient Lodges before the final form of the Master Mason Degree came into use. This legend is not unique to the Red Cross; because of its antiquity within the craft and its universal tenets, it forms the core of several Masonic degrees in the York Rite, Scottish Rite, and the honorary, appendant organizations. It is known as the “Red Cross of Babylon” in the Allied Masonic Degrees in England, alluded to in the Royal Order of Scotland, retold in several degrees of the Scottish Rite systems, and the only degree surviving intact from the mysterious rite of the *Elect Cohens of the Universe of Martinez de Pasqually*.

The Chivalric Orders in America consist of three orders, the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross, the Order of Malta, and the Order of the Temple. Of the three, the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is unique to American Templary having not been included in European or Canadian Templar Organizations. The Order of the Red Cross is based upon the scriptures of the Apocrypha, the book of I Esdras, 4, and Josephus’ secular writings relating to certain events that took place from 520 to 521 BCE. While its companion orders, the Order of Malta and the Order of the Temple are distinctly Christian with their lessons firmly rooted in the New Testament and its events taking place during the Christian Era.

Thomas Smith Webb (1771-1819) is credited with authoring this order. Controversy exists in its American origin however. The Order’s earliest appearance can be traced to the 1783 records of St. Andrew’s Lodge in Charleston, South Carolina where the Red Cross was conferred. Furthermore, others assert this Order was taken from the Scottish Rite Degrees, the Knight of the East and West and the Prince of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in 1892, the revised Ritual of the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross was unanimously adopted by the Grand Encampment and became the first of the three Chivalric Orders.

When first considered for inclusion into the Chivalric Orders, the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross met severe opposition and was criticized by such esteemed Knights Templar as Sir Alfred Creigh and Sir George S. Balckie. Each argued that the Order exhibited no connection with Templary and had no value. Their arguments stated its pagan social ceremonies were foreign to Christian Knighthood, the Red Cross ritual was set in a world having not heard the name of Christ, and the Christian candidate would find this order incompatible with the teachings of the New Testament. Yet in a few short years these arguments were turned aside within the Grand Encampment and the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross was included in the Chivalric Orders. The arguments, though weighty and from honored Sir Knights, were examined and satisfactory answered it would seem. The change of opinion was found within the ritual itself and is thus hereafter examined and explained.

This Order is founded upon the incidents which occur during the reign of Babylonian Kings Cyrus and Darius and those events experienced by the Jews in rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem. Usually in the form of a three act play, Zerubbabel, the candidate, is sent to the court of a king, arrested crossing a bridge, and after displaying fidelity, valor, and virtue is granted his desires beyond his wishes from the king.

In Act I, the Jewish Sanhedrin send an ambassador to the Court of Darius to plead for protection and assistance in their efforts to rebuild the City and Temple at Jerusalem. This ambassador is Zerubbabel, who is known to the Babylonian King. In Act II, Zerubbabel attempts to cross a river by means of a bridge, but is arrested by guards and is imprisoned. In Act III, Zerubbabel is brought before the King where their friendship is renewed and is granted a position in the royal household. Zerubbabel then enters a contest among the noblemen of the realm debating the question, “Which is greater, the

strength of wine, the power of the king, or the influence of women?” Zerubbabel opts for the latter, but when his comments turn to the immortal force of the Truth, this proves to all involved the most powerful.

Darius is moved to commemorate the occasion by creating a new order, the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross, where Zerubbabel is obligated and made its first member. The Green Sash and sword are restored and he is given the means of recognition and signs. Darius presents the Banner of the Order. Darius then declares Zerubbabel welcome to all the privileges of an Order founded upon TRUTH.

The legend of Zerubbabel’s embassy to Darius’ Court constitutes the foundation of the order’s ceremonies. Zerubbabel’s purpose at Darius’ court was to obtain the protection of the King from the Samaritans who were hindering the Jews rebuilding of the Temple. The embassy’s mission is recorded in the Book of Esdras. This successful mission connects with the Royal Arch Degree in the United States and is included at least partially within the Royal Arch Degree in Europe. The debate decides the fate of the embassy’s mission.

The first argument advances wine’s strength as being that which makes the minds of kings and paupers alike, turning all thoughts into jollity and mirth, elevates the spirits, and maketh man forget his brethren, drawing sword on one another. Wine’s argument, though factually correct, carries negative attributes which are not noble, selfless, or honorable.

The second argument professes the power of the King and propounds, while God made man master over all things, it is the power of the King to be master over men, to have them serve at his will and pleasure. This argument while not negative is amoral, it carrying no moral measure beyond the whim of the king. The kings will and pleasure serves his own nature, be it good or bad.

Zerubbabel, the last to contest, ventures that women are mightier because Kings are the gifts of women and women are the mothers of those who cultivate our vineyards. Still, it is woman who has the power to make us abandon our country and family, and often forget our best friends forsaking all comforts to live and die with them. An argument of supreme nobility, yet contains our most base sentimentalities. Zerubbabel discloses that while virtuous, woman’s influence can lead to abandoning social obligations and moral direction.

It is at this point that Zerubbabel adds, “But when all is said, neither they (women), nor Wine, nor Kings, are comparable to the almighty force of TRUTH. As for all other things they are mortal and transient, but TRUTH alone is unchangeable and everlasting, the benefits we receive from it are subject to no variation or vicissitudes of time or fortune. In her judgment is no unrighteousness, and she is the strength, wisdom, power, and majesty of all ages. BLESSED BE THE GOD OF TRUTH.”

All present acquiesce and Truth carries away the victory. Zerubbabel is lavished upon by Darius. When Darius is reminded of his vow to build Jerusalem, and to rebuild therein the Temple of God, and also to restore the vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had pillaged and carried to Babylon, grants this request. Zerubbabel returns to his people in Jerusalem with great joy, and the rebuilding of the city and Temple is immediately resumed. Darius is better than his word, making large contributions to the rebuilding out of the royal treasury.

It is self evident why the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross was not only included but seen fit to be the initial Order of the Chivalric Orders. The theme of this Order is that of the immortality of TRUTH and the worship of the God of TRUTH, or the ONE TRUE GOD. These words fore shadow the words of Jesus Christ of Nazareth: “I am the way, and the TRUTH, and the Life,” (John 14:6). The God of TRUTH is the Christian God, the Order therefore is a Christian Order which connects the Royal Arch Degree with the Order of Malta and the Order of the Temple.

Events

Jul 04 2011
Jul 27-30 2011
Aug 28-30

Independence Day
York Rite Sovereign College Annual Assembly
General Grand Chapter and Council