

# The Psalm of Fraternity

By WB Lee Anderson

“And the brother Chaplain should recite the psalm that says: Here is, how it is bgood and how it is delicious.../...to live the brothers in good unity.” This Psalm is probably one of the oldest links we have to the beginning of Masonry. It was already in use by the ancient Knights Templar in their initiation of a candidate in the year 1128. This information was taken from the “Canons of the Ritual of the Reception in the Order of the Temple.” This is the Psalm 133, attributed to David and is known as the Psalm of Ascension, the Psalm of Brotherhood, or the Psalm of Fraternity.

We Mason’s may know this text best in the King James Version: “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments. As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.” It is the first passage a candidate hears as he makes his first passage around the lodge as an Entered Apprentice. It is the verse opened on the Bible when he takes his obligation, and we all hear it at the opening of the Lodge.

In order for us to understand the relevance of this verse today, we must understand its value at the time it was written. Psalms 120 to 133 were said to be sung

by the Jewish pilgrims, first to the Tabernacle and later to the Temple as they made their annual pilgrimage to worship at the Holy of Holies and the Ark.

Between the first and last stanzas are some elements that need explanation. The precious oil was indeed just that. The recipe predates the time of David. The recipe is found in Exodus 30: vs 22-25. It consists of the following:

- 1) Myrrh- a pleasant smelling resin collected from trees in Africa and Arabia. It was very expensive and was also used as a pain numbing narcotic
- 2) Sweet Cinnamon- Coming from Asia.
- 3) Fragrant Cane of Calamus- a tall semi-evergreen that grows in damp swampy areas. It is similar to Iris in appearance, growing up to six feet. It is banned to be grown in the United States because it is a drug.
- 4) Cassia- A member of the Laurel family. The inner bark when dried is cinnamon.
- 5) The finest olive oil.

This oil was used to consecrate the Chief Priest of the Temple and was very expensive. To be used in the quantity used in this Psalm passage, it would have been considered extravagant.

Aaron was Moses' older brother and was the spokesman for Moses when he made his demands before Pharaoh. He was the great grandson of Levi. Moses appointed him as the Chief Priest and his sons as priests. The length of the beard was

a symbol of patriarchal and religious authority. In Aarons case, it was never cut. Aaron's robe was long and flowing. Different interpretations of this Psalm has led to confusion as to the length of the beard. Some versions say the collar of his robe, while others list it as over the collar on the skirt of the robe.

Mount Hermon is one of three mountains marking the Northern boundary of Israel. This mountain range holds peaks that are all over ten thousand feet tall, with snow covered crests year round. These mountains created a physical barrier, capturing moisture from the ocean and at night condensing it into a very heavy fog reaching the mountains of Zion. The mountains of Zion are the hills of Jerusalem and where first the Tabernacle, and later the Temple stood. The melting snow from these mountains creates the River Jordan.

With this as a background, I want to share with you some thoughts found in a paper written by past Grand Master of California, John L Cooper III, titled "The Practice of Brotherhood". He begins by saying "This cryptic psalm is at once a challenge for us to enter into a profound mystery, and a promise that if we do so, the results will be a life changing experience." He further states that the psalm implies a connection between "dwelling together in unity" and "life for evermore". It is the relationship between God and a man and is the proper provenance of a man's own religion.

Freemasonry is not a religion. And while a belief in God is a prerequisite for one to become a Mason, one must work out his own relationship with God outside of

Freemasonry. We insist that a man is responsible before his God for what he does with his life, but we ask each one to seek the important and eternal answers from his own religious faith.

If we connect the first and last stanzas together, the purpose of this psalm stands out more clearly. “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity...for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.” In the Bible, a blessing is considered as conferring with a special power upon another. It is usually thought of as a divine act of God granting His blessing, not upon one, but extending from one generation to another. It is a way of guaranteeing the continuity of community down through the ages. It is the latter meaning that Psalm 133 has for us as Freemasonry, rather than any religious significance. It helps us to understand the teachings of Freemasonry.

The first stanza states the condition necessary for the latter to be met. If a Mason cannot understand the necessity of “dwelling together in unity”, he can’t expect the result of God’s blessing upon what he does as a Mason. We are first telling the Entered Apprentice as the Psalm is recited as his first step in Masonry, that much of what he learns in the lessons of Masonry revolves around the sense of unity and brotherhood. It should be revived in us at the opening of Lodge.

What is Unity? It is not meant as conformity, but rather, as a harmonious combining of parts into one, among a number of people. We ask each brother, on his

own, to think for himself and to search for the meaning of truth. Freemasonry insists that truth will emerge on its own if we are patient enough in seeking it.

This then, is the life giving promise. Not in a religious sense, but more so a human one. If we live our lives as if others were more important than oneself, we will be enriched by the greatest blessing we could ever know. This lesson was first taught to us as an Entered Apprentice. Once properly understood, the mystery will grow in Grace and shall bless us every day in everything we do.