

THE LEGEND  
OF THE  
Gospel of St. John

A STUDY IN RITUALISTIC EVOLUTION

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By GEO. W. WARVELLE, K. G. C.

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PREPARED FOR THE GRAND IMPERIAL COUNCIL, ORDER OF THE RED  
CROSS OF CONSTANTINE, FOR THE WESTERN MASONIC  
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CHICAGO

1900

*McAllen*



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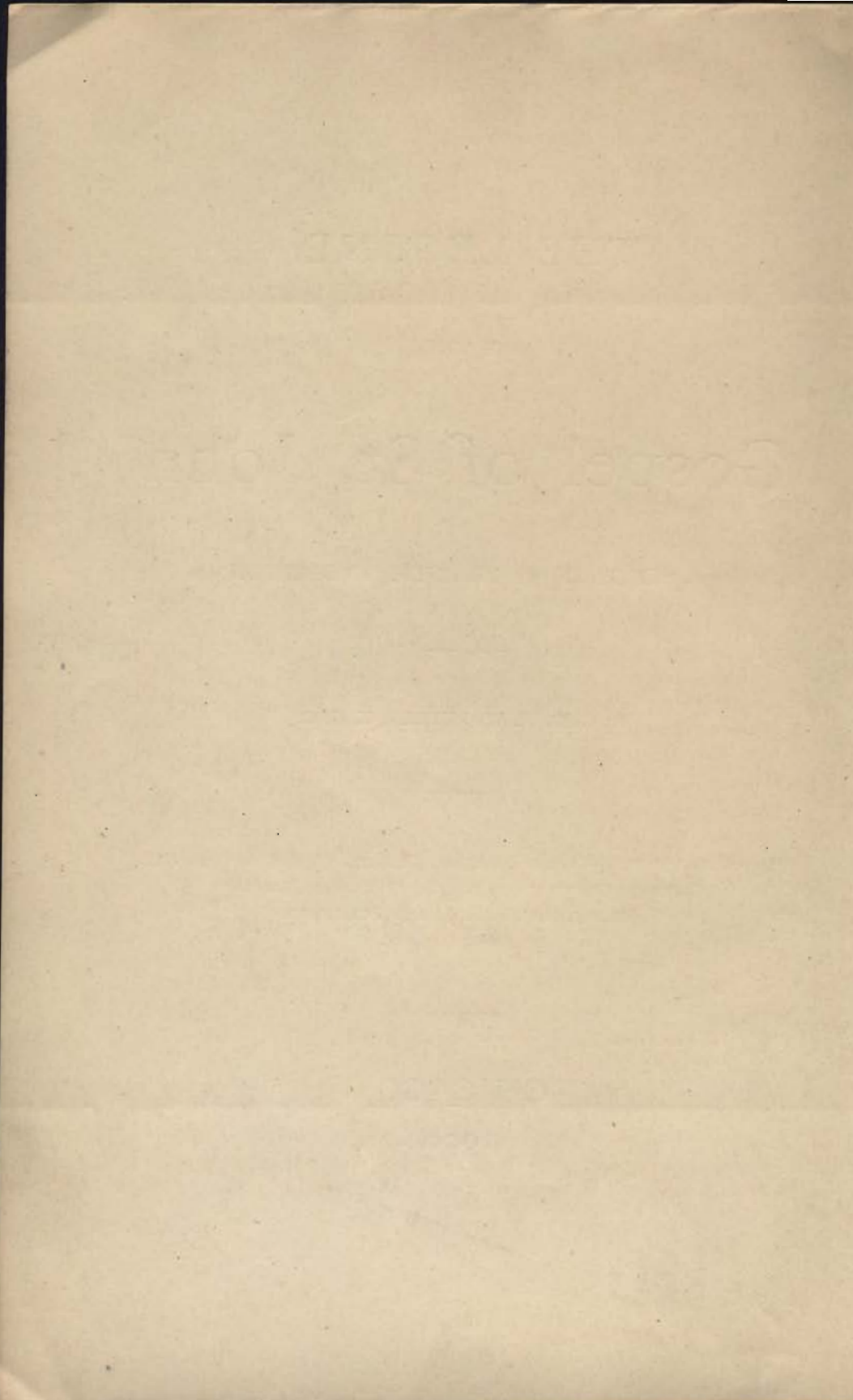
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THE LEGEND  
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GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

BY GEO. W. WARVELLE, K. G. C.

(Read before St. John's Conclave, No. 1, May 17, 1900.)

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It is asserted, by the fathers of the Rite, that the Constantinian Orders of Christian Knighthood consist of a series of degrees in which the ultimate objects of Freemasonry are revealed. The third grade, or "point," is styled "Novice and Knight of the Holy Order of St. John the Evangelist," and purports to be a continuation of the Palestine Order of St. John, as distinguished from the Hospitallers and other Orders which claim a dedication to that saint. It is based upon certain incidents said to have occurred in the restoration of the fourth Gospel, and assumes to be a final exposition of the fundamental concepts of Freemasonry. The symbolic mystery involved is a complement of the degree of Master Mason and an extension of that of the Royal Arch. It is further claimed that the Knights of St. John, of Palestine, were the *true Masons*, as to them only were the words of the highest import imparted, and that it was only after warfare with the enemies of the faith they received this privilege, and were admitted to full communion with the Holy Brotherhood. However this may be, it is certain that to the student of our mysteries the degree presents a most interesting study and is fraught with the deepest significance. To those who seek to know more than the meager outline afforded by the ritual the writer offers this humble contribution in the hope that it will serve, not only to convey some measure of information, but as well to stimulate original investigation on the part of others, and thus increase our common fund of knowledge.

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Of the personality of the reputed author of the fourth Gospel but little is positively known. It would seem that John was the son of Zebedee, a Galilean fisherman. It is surmised that he was

born at Bethsaida, and that he, together with his brother James, followed the calling of their father. When he was born or when he died, we do not know. He seems to have been attending upon the preaching of John the Baptist at Bethany when he first became acquainted with Jesus, and when he, together with his brother, Andrew and Peter, received the call to follow the Master, he promptly complied, and the remainder of his life was passed in the ministry. It would further seem that he soon took a high rank among the apostles and attained the distinction of being the disciple whom Jesus loved. After the death of Jesus he remained at Jerusalem for a time, and after that his movements are obscure or unknown. So much, we may say, is fairly established by authentic data. All beyond this rests only on ecclesiastical tradition.

But if sober history affords us no other glimpses of this apostle, we have a wealth of legend and unverified tradition. Indeed, with the exception of Peter, no other apostle figures more prominently in the legendary lore of the early Christian church, and from these oftentimes inconsistent and contradictory legends we gather that John removed to Ephesus, where he engaged in religious work and teaching, and where he died at a very advanced age.

\* \* \*

It is said that when John had become very old, being upward of ninety years of age, he compiled the work known to us by its title in the New Testament canon, as the "Gospel according to John." This was the accepted belief of the church for many years and is still implicitly believed by a very large number of good and pious men. But for a number of years past the biblical scholars have been receding from this view until, at the present time, only a small number can be found who give it their unqualified adhesion. There are many difficulties in the way of believing that John the Apostle is the author of the book. The author is not mentioned anywhere by name, and the caption is a late addition by the editors. He is described, however, as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and which "leaned on His breast," and the early writers, in several instances, ascribed the work to John.



There is much reason to believe that the book, while representing the thoughts and ideas of John, was yet written by another hand; indeed there is internal evidence to that effect.<sup>1</sup> It has further been suggested that it may have been an attempt on the part of disciples of John to reproduce the spirit of their master's teaching after he had been taken from them by death, and there is much, both internal and external, to favor this view.

But this article is not intended as an essay in biblical criticism, therefore we may leave the disputed question as to the authorship of the fourth Gospel to the critics and theologians. Whether John wrote it or some other person is immaterial. What we are interested in is the Gospel itself, not its author.

\* \* \*

As to the time of the compilation of the fourth Gospel there is considerable conflict of opinion, and the opinions turn on the question of authorship. If we conclude that it was written by John, or by his dictation, or even under his supervision and in connection with others, then we must assign a time a little before the year 100. If we adopt the theory of another class of critics, who hold that the writer is post-apostolic, even though he may have embodied in his book a genuine Johannine writing, then the probable date is somewhere in the second century, *circa*, 140. There is much reason for supporting this last hypothesis, but as either date will not in any manner interfere with our legend we may leave that question also to be decided by the critics.

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The marked characteristic of the fourth Gospel and that which distinguishes it from the so-called synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, lies in the fact that it is doctrinal rather than historical, and it is in the doctrines of the book, or some of them, that we find the essence of Freemasonry. The writer, whoever he may have been, treats his subject in an entirely different manner from that of the other Evangelists, and introduces that mystical element so fully wrought out in Freemasonry;

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<sup>1</sup> John, xxi: 24.

the element, in fact, which forms the basis of all of the higher forms of Masonic thought, and which furnishes the key by which we interpret the primary symbolism of the Masters' Lodge. The Word—the divine *Logos*—the symbol of wisdom, the mystic light, the pillars and supports of the system of Masonic philosophy expounded in the Constantinian Orders, are contained in this remarkable book. The other Gospels deal largely with material things. The authors see only the physical nature of the matters they discuss or the incidents they narrate. The author of the fourth Gospel rises to a higher plane, and shows the spiritual nature of the things which form his theme. Now, for the first time, we are shown symbols, and our attention is directed not to the material thing which constitutes the symbol but to the thing symbolized.

Of course, there are many shades of opinion with respect to the interpretation of the text of this Gospel, and every man reads it according to the light that is within him. The framers of these Orders have constructed a system, which, whatever else may be said concerning it, is at least coherent and consistent, both with itself and the general plan of Freemasonry, and the core of that system is found in the initial statement of the Gospel according to St. John.

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Having thus hastily introduced our subject we may now proceed to a consideration of the legend which so conspicuously marks the third "point" of the Constantinian Orders.

From general history we learn that Flavius Claudius Julianus, surnamed the Apostate, a nephew of Constantine the Great, by the acclamation of the army, assumed the imperial purple in the year 360. Prior thereto he seems to have lapsed from Christianity into paganism. As a part of his plans he published an edict granting full toleration to all sects and religions, and among other things issued a permission to the exiled Jews to return and rebuild their temple at Jerusalem. In pursuance of this permission work was accordingly commenced in the year 362, but evidently even the favor of Julian was insufficient to promote the enterprise, for the temple was never rebuilt. Just what were the real causes which produced this result is a difficult matter at this



day to determine, for fancy and fable have well nigh extinguished whatever reliable data may have once existed. Strange stories are related concerning the occurrences which transpired when the attempt to rebuild was made, and among the incidents so narrated we find the legend of the Gospel of St. John.

The story has been variously told by a number of persons and the different relations conform substantially with the ritual of the grade, but it would seem that the framers of the liturgy borrowed their account from that given by Nicephorus Callistus, one of the Byzantine school of theologians, who lived in the first half of the fourteenth century and who attained to great eminence in the Eastern Church. In this learned writer's *Ecclesiastical History*,<sup>2</sup> the classical scholar will find a description of several of the events preserved in our ritual, but for the benefit of those who do not read Greek the following translation is offered. This translation is taken from a book on the "Temple of Solomon," written by one Samuel Lee, a Puritan minister of the seventeenth century (1659), and it is not improbable that it may have served the purposes of the original fabricators of the degree. The story commences with the attempt to rebuild, and runs as follows:

"The Jews having got together as many as were skilful in the art of Building, and prepared materials for the structure, and fully cleansed the place, they provided spades made of silver, their charges being allowed out of the publique stock. With such earnestness and alacrity did they labour in the work, that the very women did carry away the rubbish in their laps, and whatsoever Jewels or other precious ornaments they had, they expended upon that business, etc., and when as they had dug up the remainders of the old building from the lowest foundations and had cleared the ground, so that now there was not a stone remaining upon a stone, according to the prophetic. The next day coming to the place to lay the first foundation, they say there was a great earthquake, insomuch that the stones were cast out of the foundation, so that many of the Jews were slain, who either came to see the work, or had the oversight of the Structure. The publique buildings also which were nearest the Temple were loos-

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter XXXII.

ened, and falling down with great force, proved the Sepulchres of those that were in them. Some that attempted to fly away, were found half dead; some lost their legs, hands, and other members, according as the violence of that sudden accident seized upon them. The Earthquake was scarce over, but those who remained fell upon the work again, etc. But when the second time they attempted it, some fire violently issued out of the foundations, and (other) fire fell down impetuously from Heaven, and consumed more than before. There is (he saith) some variations among Authors of the punctual time and the manner of this accident of fire, but the main of the truth is without doubt. Moreover, the fire which came down from Heaven consumed to ashes the hammers, graving tools, saws, hatchets, axes, and all other instruments which the workmen had brought for their service, continuing a whole day together, etc., when Cyril, who was at that time Bishop of Jerusalem, saw these things. He considered in his minde the word of the Prophet Daniel, to which Christ also had set his seal in the holy Gospel. He told them all, that now was the time that the Oracle of our Savior had its accomplishment; which said, That a stone should not remain upon a stone in the Temple. And when he had spoken this, a sore earthquake assailed the foundations, and cast out all the remaining stones, and dispersed them. Upon this, there arose a fearful storm, and whirled into the ayr many thousand bushels of lime, plaister, and sudden flames of fire flashing from beneath, burnt up in a moment an innumerable company of people, that were as yet either labouring in the work, or that came to behold it. Thus did Julian fulfil Christ's predictions concerning Jerusalem, which he designed to have made void, etc. These prodigies are sufficient to prove the truth of the Oracle. But what shall be now declared, being very wonderful, will further confirm it, which I shall report, as I have found in the Archives, and it is thus: When the foundations were a laying as I have said, there was a stone amongst the rest, to which the bottom of the foundation was fastned, that slipt from its place, and discovered the mouth of a cave which had been cut in the rock. Now when they could not see the bottom by reason of its depth, the Overseers of the building being dsirous to have certain knowledge of the place,



tied a long rope to one of the Labourers, and let him down. He being come to the bottom, found water in it, that took him up to mid-angles, and searching every part of that hollow place, he found it to be four-square as far as he could conjecture by feeling. Then returning toward the mouth of it, he hit upon a certain little pillar, not much higher than the water, and lighting with his hand upon it, found a book lying there wrapped up in a piece of thin and clean linnen. Having taken it into his hands, he signified by the rope that they should draw him up. When he was pulled up, he shews the book, which struck them with admiration, especially seeming so fresh and untoucht as it did, being found in so dark and obscure a hole; the Book being unfolded, did amaze not only the Jews, but the Grecians also, holding forth even at the beginning of it in great Letters (in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God). To speak plainly, that scripture did manifestly contain the whole Gospel, which the Divine tongue of the Virgin Disciple had declared."

Millman<sup>3</sup> has given a graphic account of this unsuccessful effort to rebuild the temple and the calamities which accompanied it, as well as an attempt at rational explanation of the phenomena, but makes no mention of the recovery of the Gospel. Gibbon<sup>4</sup> also relates the circumstance, although rather inclined to discredit the evidence, but is silent with respect to the discovery, nor do the later historians of the church and the biblical writings in any way allude to it.

Nor does it seem that the fourth Gospel was ever lost. It came into public notice during the latter half of the second century, and from thence hitherto has been received as a book of authority. Neither do our traditions assert that the book was the original compilation; at best it was only the "Gospel of Our Holy Patron." Possibly there is a recondite meaning attached to the circumstance which the writer has failed to grasp and which our ritual does not make clear. If so, then let us hope that some more learned and industrious brother may solve the mystery and continue the essay thus begun.

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<sup>3</sup>History of the Jews, Book XX.

<sup>4</sup>Gib. Rome, Chap. XXIII.



