The Voyage from Corruption to Harmony: fresh insights into the inspiration of Noah and ‘the primitive’ within Freemasonry

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The main purpose of this talk is to provide an explanation as to why the Constitution of Accepted Free Masons of 1723, and again in 1738, made a point of prominent references to Noah. This has never previously been adequately explained though various guesses have been offered. An understanding and appreciation sheds a fresh ray of light upon the social circumstances preceding the formation of the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster in 1717. It should promote a better interpretation of the motivations underlying English Freemasonry at that crucial time.

I shall not attempt here to examine the extensive Noachite concept which has been worked up through later Masonic degrees. This has played a central part in Adoptive Masonry. It has been reflected in the 21st degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (the ‘Noachite or Prussian Knight’). It has formed the basis of Ebenezer Sibley’s later period of Antediluvian Masonry, and a version continues to be enacted in the Royal Ark Mariner degree within English Freemasonry. A considerable literature already exists about all these developments.

On the third page of the 1723 Constitutions, Dr James Anderson’s official ‘History’ says:

...we may safely conclude the old World, that lasted 1656 Years, could not be ignorant of Masonry; and that both the families of Seth and Cain erected many curious Works, until at length NOAH, the ninth from Seth, was commanded and directed of God to build the great Ark, which, tho’ of Wood, was certainly fabricated by Geometry, and according to the Rules of Masonry. NOAH, and his three Sons, JAPHET,SHEM, and HAM, all Masons true, brought with them over the Flood the Traditions and Arts of the Ante-deluvians, and amply communicated them to their growing Off-spring . . .

The opening reference to ‘the old world’ alludes to the first Age of St. Augustine’s Six Ages of the World, the so-called Adamitic Age. St. Augustine identified a sequence in the Life of Man which became standard teaching over many centuries. For example, the chapters in the book Long Livers, published in 1722 with a famous Dedication to the Free-Masons by ‘Eugenius Philalethes Jun.’ [Robert Samber], is arranged by these divisions:

Chapter 1. Of the Immortality of the First Man
Chapter 2. The Duration of the Life of Man in the first Age of the World, from the Creation to the Flood
Chapter 3. The Duration of the Life of Man in the second Age of the World, from the Flood till Abraham
Chapter 4. The Duration of the Life of Man in the third Age of the World, from Abraham to David . . .

[etc.]
Anderson, a Presbyterian minister, was thus seeking, by applied logic, to infer the introduction of 'Masonry' (which he compounded, on medieval authority, as equivalent to the practice of 'Geometry') into the first Age of Man. He could identify this Age as lasting 1656 years, drawing upon the deductive work of Archbishop Ussher in the mid-17th century. Dr James Anderson has often been decried by later historians for his flights of fancy but to an educated Englishman of the period his sources for this paragraph about Noah and his offspring would have seemed well-founded.

Indeed, Robert Samber (who was critical of much that had been introduced by the newly-established Grand Lodge) shared the same outlook as Anderson regarding the person of Noah.

This wicked and impious Race [of Giants] (for the whole Creation groaned under their Impieties) the Almighty washed off from the Face of the Earth by the Deluge, excepting Noah, a just Man in the Generations of Seth, with his Family. This good holy Man endeavoured, after the Flood, to restore the Law of Nature which had been so long obscured by the Pride and Impiety of those that perished. But his Sons and their Issue, following the Example of the Giants, began to domineer in like Manner over their Inferiors, to build mighty Cities and form Kingdoms, so that from Noah till Abraham there is no mention made of any just Man . . .

James Anderson considerably ‘embellished’ in his edition of 1738 what he had written in 1723. The first chapter of his History (‘From the Creation to Grand Master Nimrod’) describes the making of the Ark, which was engineered and commanded by four ‘Grand Officers’. He went on:

After the Flood, NOAH and his 3 Sons, having preserved the Knowledge of the Arts and Sciences, communicated It to their growing Off-spring, who were all of one Language and Speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyd [sic] from the East, (the Plains of Mount Ararat, where the Ark rested) towards the West, they found a Plain in the Land of SHINAR, and dwelt there together, as NOACHIDAE, or Sons of Noah . . .

Anderson attached to this a note that Noachidae was ‘The first Name of Masons, according to some old Traditions.’ He then built upon this in a most important way by claiming that all professing Masons are themselves Noachidae. This is made explicit in the First Charge, ‘Concerning GOD and Religion’.

A Mason is obliged by his Tenure to observe the Moral Law, as a true Noachida; and if he rightly understands the Craft, he will never be a Stupid Atheist, nor an Irreligious Libertin, nor act against Conscience. In antient Times the Christian Masons were charged to comply with the Christian Usages of each Country where they travell’d or work’d: But Masonry being found in all Nations, even of divers Religions, they are now only charged to adhere to that Religion in which all Men agree (leaving each Brother to his own particular Opinions) that is, to be Good Men and True, Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Names, Religions, or Persuasions they may be distinguish’d: For they all agree in the 3 great Articles of NOAH, enough to preserve the Cement of the Lodge. Thus

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Masonry is the Center of their Union and the happy Means of conciliating Persons that otherwise must have remain’d at a perpetual Distance.

Much has been written about this, perhaps led by Knoop and Jones’s paper ‘Freemasonry and the Idea of Natural Religion’. No one in the English-speaking world, not even Knoop and Jones, has hitherto offered more than guesses for what is meant by the ‘three great Articles of Noah’. The three Articles are not ‘Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth’ as Begemann and Vibert surmised. Nor do they consist of beliefs in the existence of a Supreme Intelligence and in the immortality of the soul which Mackey avers to be ‘doctrines which should constitute the creed of Freemasonry and hence one of the names bestowed upon the Freemasons from the earliest times was that of ‘Noachidae’ or Noachites’, that is to say, the descendants of Noah, and the transmitters of his religious dogmas. These are all fancies.

Dominique Jardin in France has written an extremely full and valuable account of Noachism and its relationship to the 21st Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. The third section of this paper is headed ‘The political and religious implications of Noachism or Noachism as ecumenism in the cause of Freemasonry’. In the course of this Jardin notes, on the authority of Friedrich Nielsen as quoted by F. Katz, that it was the English scholar John Selden who brought to the surface three principal articles derived from the ‘Laws of Noah’. These are undoubtedly what Anderson was referring to by ‘the 3 great Articles of Noah, enough to preserve the Cement of the Lodge’.

According to well-known Rabbinic tradition there were seven laws of Noah. The seven Noahide Laws form a set of moral imperatives given by God for the ‘children of Noah’, meaning all humanity. They can be found outlined on Wikipedia. John Selden (1584-1654) wrote about all seven in considerable detail in his important work De Jure Naturali et Gentium Juxta Disciplinam Ebreorum, published in 1640. Like almost all of Selden’s work this was written in Latin and his style is very dense. Consequently, although he was recognised in his day as being the leading English scholar of rabbinic literature, not much has been written about him until recent times. His work, however, was solid, and in relation to the ethos pervading the newly-formed Grand Lodge in London, significant.

The period of the first half of the 17th century had been one of intense intellectual ferment in England and elsewhere. Religious matters were vitally contentious. Religious matters “involved not simply rival conceptions of God, but conflicting constructions of human (and Christian) identity and of personal, social and political relations.” This is a huge subject; one of importance because there is reason to think that the old traditions and symbolism of Masons took on a new significance in providing a vivid expression of aspirational truth and virtue to put alongside the discordant creeds motivating so many men. These religious and social strains led directly to resonant horrors of the English Civil War.

2 Ars Quatuor Coronatorum [‘AQC’] Vol.56 (1943), 38-57.
In the 1640s…Selden followed through on his longstanding hunch that ancient Jewish society had managed both a thoroughgoing social cohesion and an intimacy with the divine will. He worked, moreover, from the presumption that the divinely commanded legal institution, the Sanhedrin, had been largely responsible for ensuring this optimum state of affairs for a religious society committed at once to lawful behaviour and spiritual zeal. . . Selden went to his grave still fully engaged in a massive project to recover what might prove to be the optimum institution for curing the woes of 17th century religious society, the Judaic Sanhedrin.6

Selden had identified Noachite knowledge in the *jus naturali*. Very frequently throughout his 1640 book he equates the two: *jus Noachidarum seu Naturale*, or *jus Naturali seu Noachidarum*, occasionally clarified by *ante legem Mosaiacam*.

At the start of the final chapter numbered ten of his first book (the whole work is comprised in seven books) Selden writes:

> Capita Juris Naturalis seu Universalis, juxta Ebreos, designaturo subit in mentem illud S. Ambrosii; Lex Naturalis [In Epist. Ad Romanos cap.5.] Tres habet Partes, cuius Prima haec est, ut agnitus honoretur Creator, nec ejus Claritas & Majestas alicui de Creaturis deputetur. Secunda autem pars est Moralis, hoc est, ut Bene Vivatur, modestia gubernante. Congruit enim homini habenti notitiam creatoris vitam suam lege fraenare, ne frustretur agnito. Tertia vero Pars est Docilibis, ut notitia Creatoris Dei & exemplum morum ceteris tradatur, ut discant, quemadmodum apud Creatorem meritum collocatur.

A principal aim of the present paper is to quote these exact words used by Selden.

Dominique Jardin, following Nielsen, expresses the three chosen items as being “*croyance et adoration de Dieu, vivre selon la morale, montrer l'exemple aux autres par sa conduite*”. (Belief in and adoration of God, to live a moral life, to demonstrate this example to others.)

Jardin goes on to quote F. Tristan extending this concept:

> “la reconnaissance d'un Dieu unique, le refus de l'immoralite et le refus du sang verse par la violence ce qui ouvre grande la porte a l'universalite au sein d'un theism non define par une revelation particuliere.” (Recognition of one unique God, the shunning of immorality and the shedding of blood by violent means, opening wide the door to universality within a theism undefined by any particular creed.)

The Latin words used by Selden, however, principally quoting the *Ambrosiaster*, can be translated more exactly as follows:

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For the one who is going to define the articles of natural or universal law according to the Hebrews, there comes to mind that passage of St. Ambrose: [In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans chapter 5]: *For the natural law has three parts, of which the first is this, that the one recognised as Creator should be honoured, and that neither his glory nor his majesty should be attributed to any of his creatures. The second part is moral, that is, that we should live properly under the control of modesty, for it is right that someone who has some understanding of his Creator should control his life by rule of law, so that his understanding might have meaning. But the third part of the law can be taught, so that knowledge of God the Creator and an example of moral behaviour is passed on to others, that they may learn that one’s just deserts lie in the hands of the Creator.*

As an aside, during a period of severe religious and civic strain similar to that experienced during Selden’s life, St. Ambrose, during his episcopacy of 374-397 in Milan, had refashioned religious thought with many writings (one of which was *De Noe*) based upon wide study. He is the patron saint of Milan and was accounted (with Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great) as one of the four original doctors of the Church. He strongly opposed Arianism and had uneven relationships with members of the imperial dynasty. He taught and impressed Augustine who remarked of him that ‘he drew aside the veil of mystery and spread . . . the spiritual meaning of passages.’ He is credited as having introduced antiphonal singing into the Church. It may or may not be merely coincidence that he is applauded for an act of mercy, and referred to as ‘the sweet bishop’, at the end of an early account of the masons’ patron saints, the *Quattuor Coronati*, written in Ghent in 1427.

Selden attended the conference whose outcome in 1646 was to be the Westminster Confession of Faith, a key Presbyterian formulation from the English Civil War. Chapter Seven of this document noted the Covenant of Works, bestowed upon Adam upon condition of perfect and personal obedience, and the Covenant of Grace provided by Christ granting salvation by faith. The Confession stated that this was one and the same covenant, ‘under various dispensations’ (i.e., periods of history). Chapter Eight declared Jesus Christ as the Mediator between God and Man using epithets such as ‘Prophet, Priest and King’. This last, orthodox pre-Reformation, formulation is well known from some early Masonic texts. Acceptance of the Westminster Confession was repealed under Charles II (but was permitted in Scotland following the accession of William III in recognition of Presbyterian values).

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7 Translation kindly provided by Dr John Wade and Christopher Powell.
9 The ritual of the Royal Order of Scotland contains a reference to such dispensations: “What things ought Freemasons chiefly to commemorate? Three great events: the Creation of the World, Noah’s Flood and the Redemption of Man.” Each of these is associated by ‘covenants’, the last being a new Testament bequeathed.
10 For example, in G. G. Watkins, ‘Why doth the sun within our lodge with so much brightness shine?’, *Manchester Association for Masonic Research*, Vol. 97 (2007), 11-58. The formulation is still to be found within the ritual of the Royal Arch in the British Isles, coupled with the concept of a Sanhedrin.
In the political entanglements, persecution and indignation over dissent, popery and toleration that followed hard on the Restoration, however, religion proved so contentious that it was eventually, if haphazardly, excluded as the integrator or 'cement' of human society.\textsuperscript{11}

What followed it? A latitudinarianism within the Church of England, headed by Tillotson, and a new 'First Charge' for the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster to conciliate and embrace all those who would otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance. Selden’s three great Articles of Noah, by which all Masons held their Tenure, underpinned this inclusive social ideal.

From the essentials of Anderson’s account, “... Noah... this good holy Man endeavoured, after the Flood, to restore the Law of Nature... and his 3 Sons, having preserved the knowledge of the Arts & Sciences, communicated It to their growing Offspring...” (and being recognised as one of these) “A Mason is obliged... to obey the Moral Law as a true Noachida; and if he rightly understands the Craft, he will never be a Stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertin, nor act against Conscience.”

Selden had come to develop his own fundamental understanding of the law of nature: “I cannot fancy to myself what the law of nature means, but the Law of God. How should I know I ought not to steal, I ought not to commit adultery, unless somebody had told me so?” Selden pointed out that human opinions, our minds, might change. “Whence then comes this restraint? From a higher power, nothing else can bind. ... It must from a superior power, even God Almighty.”

‘The fact of the matter is that he identified the natural law with the precepts given to Noah (through Adam). ... “The natural law thus signifies here what is the universal law or law of the world; the law of nations signifies what is particular to some nations”. His subject, then, is the natural law insofar as it was given to Noah through Adam for his posterity as the universal law for all nations and all periods of history.’\textsuperscript{12}

Anderson thus binds Masons to this natural, moral, law, ‘the Religion in which all Men agree.’ Selden had identified the authority of St. Ambrose as condensing its essence into three parts: displaying honour to God, modesty in living, and models of consistently good behaviour as an exemplar of the divine purpose.

The three articles of Noah as expressed in the words attributed to St. Ambrose are centred upon God as the source of moral and harmonious existence, applicable at all times and in all places. Under this concept men of many opinions and religions could unite. Goodness could be celebrated, respect shared, and true happiness experienced. A \textit{New Atlantis} by another name, derived from the primitive!

Freemasonry has evolved in many different ways. Interpretations have varied “to suit what is particular to some nations”. Members have not always lived up to its ideals. But many have, and as unwitting Noachidae, mould their endeavours in this present Age to do so. That mythical quarry on the hills of harmony on which the ark came to rest has unobtrusively supplied the cement for this purpose. With due modesty, learnt from the collapse of Babel, well-formed arches of crafted living stones still continue to radiate gracefully the fruits of the holy spirit round the world.