

WHY THE FEAST?

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This is a paper I prepared during the Scottish Rite Celebration of the Feast of Tishri. The Masonic experience was adversely impacted due to the Covid 19 pandemic, largely because one of the most significant aspects of a Masonic assembly had been prohibited. Brotherly assembly known as Masonic refreshment, or feasting.

As you may know, the Feast of Tishri commemorates the completion of King Solomon's Temple. Now held in conjunction with the Feast of the Tabernacles, it also commemorates the time of harvest and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Celebration of the Feast connects us with the events and personalities of a much earlier time.

Archaeological evidence informs us that the custom of feasting is at least 12,000 years old. Sites found in modern Israel contain clear indications that feasting was occurring at this time in a way to establish commonality and community among those who lived in city-states.

Earliest literary references to feasting are found in Sumerian religious texts that date to about 3000 B.C. Slightly later references are found in Chinese history and Egyptian culture. The weight of the evidence shows that feasting is not specific to any one culture. It is a worldwide and cross-cultural tradition. Ancient feasts were celebrations of special events. They were used to solidify spiritual and family ties. It was not uncommon for feasts in the ancient world to last for several days.

Feasting is certainly a part of Freemasonry's history. The Symbolic Lodge still celebrates St. John the Baptist's Day in June and St. John the Evangelist's Day in December. These feasts were originally pagan festivals that celebrated the change of the seasons. As western Europe was converted to Christianity, the Church co-opted the pagan festivals and gave them religious themes. Later, Freemasonry adopted the two Saints John as the patron saints of the Fraternity and the observance of their feast days took on Masonic significance.

Prior to the formation of the Grand Lodge of England, Lodges tended to be small, with only about eight to twenty-five members. The members of these Lodges were intimately acquainted with each other, and their meetings and festivities were close-knit, hospitable, and convivial.

It was no accident that the four Lodges that founded the Grand Lodge of England met to do so on St. John the Baptist's Day in 1717. The Lodges that formed the Grand Lodge of England had two

stated objectives. The first was to establish a center of union and harmony; and the second reason was to re-establish the custom of feasting.

Early versions of Masonic feasts became known as “Table Lodges.” Attendance was restricted only to Masons – no profane were allowed. The Table Lodges were tyled events. As the years have passed, the formal Table Lodges have given way to family dinners, picnics and potluck events.

In contemporary Freemasonry, although the formal feast is a rare occurrence, Masons still often formally break bread with each other with a Festive Board. The Masonic feast accomplishes all the things that our Masonic ancestors valued. A festive board is a dinner that can be open to any brother, or guest, without any real “formal” guidelines. It does not necessarily have to be on an open lodge night, nor in a lodge building. There is no need for the brethren to be in aprons or regalia, and there is no need for the charter, or the great/lesser lights.

Another gathering alternative is a Table Lodge. The Table Lodge is not just an ordinary dinner, or banquet, but a special ceremony. It is complete with a Ritual which incorporates the terminology of centuries ago. It includes toasts, Masonic songs, and a good Masonic education. The tables should be arranged very deliberately, and the altar and lights should be placed in the center. Most importantly, the lodge should be ritually opened and tyled. Only Masons are allowed to attend, a charter must be present, and there shall be no more than seven toasts as prescribed by the table lodge ritual.

The Masonic feast is a celebration. As Freemasons, we have much to celebrate. The science of Freemasonry is based on reason, and, because of that reality, we have cause to celebrate freedom from superstition. Freemasonry unites men of all races, faiths and nationalities. Around the altar of Freemasonry, we celebrate the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of man. Freemasonry represents coming from intellectual darkness into the light of knowledge. As Freemasons, we celebrate our journey from darkness to light.

The Masonic feast is a time of commemoration. We think of the many men who have gone before us in Freemasonry and their contributions to the Craft. Through introspection and quiet contemplation, we review our own Masonic journey and acknowledge our personal instances of success and failure in our quest to become better men. Through the festive board, we remind ourselves of, and renew our commitment to, the obligation that we assumed to improve ourselves daily. The feast gives us the opportunity to remember those who have been inspirational in our individual lives, and, perhaps, equips us to be a source of inspiration to someone else.

The Masonic feast is a time to connect. Dining together promotes the fellowship necessary to allow Freemasonry to thrive. It illustrates the use of the trowel, in that it spreads the cement of brotherly love and unites us into that one common society, or band of brothers, among

whom no contention should ever exist, except that most noble contention of who can best work and who can best agree.

The concept of the Masonic feast is not limited to Scottish Rite Masonry. Any Blue Lodge, and, for that matter, any group of Masons may host a festive board. If you are looking for ways to promote fellowship and celebrate traditions in your Blue Lodge, consider the Masonic feast. The festive board is one more example of how Freemasonry unites men who, otherwise, would have remained at a perpetual distance.

Freemasonry gives us much for which to be grateful.

Celebrate, Brothers!

Come to the feast!