

The Bearings or Devices. on the Twelve Ensigns

In the Symbolical Lecture we are told that the bearings or devices on the twelve ensigns figuratively refer to the peculiar blessing bequeathed to the father of each tribe by the Patriarch Jacob, when he called them together for that purpose, as we find recorded in the 49th chapter of Genesis. But nowhere in the V.S.L. are we told what the devices should be. This information comes from commentators on the Bible, who base their interpretations on the words used by Jacob. Some of these interpretations go back hundreds of years, to about the second century A.D. Let us look at these interpretations in turn, in the order in which the names appear in Genesis 49.

Reuben Genesis 49: 3-4 Reuben, thou art my first born, my might, and the beginning of my Strength, the excellence of dignity and the excellence of power. Unstable as water, thou shall not excel; because thou wentest up to thy Father's bed; then defilest thou it; he went up to my couch.

The usual bearing for Reuben shows waves of the sea (unstable as water), but some- times, it shows a man (my first born). We use the figure of a man, as does the Grand Chapter of Scotland. The Grand Chapter of England uses waves of the sea.

Simeon and Levi Gen.49:5-7 "Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in .their habitations. O my soul, come not .thou into their secrets; unto their assemblies, mine honour be not thou united; for in their anger their slew a man, and in .their self-will they digged down a well. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and .their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob and scatter .them in Israel"

These verses recall the murderous attack by Simeon and Levi on the Shechemites as recorded in Gen. 34:25-7. As swords were used in this attack, the bearing for Simeon is a sword. We use a sword or a tower, whilst the Grand Chapter of Scotland uses a tower. This could be a reference to the city of Shechem, where Simeon and Levi carried out their attack.

Judah Gen. 49:8-12 Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise; thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow done before thee Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my Son, thou art gone up; he stooped down, he couched as a lion; who shall raise him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall be the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his asses colt unto the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk"

The bearing associated with Judah is a lion couchant {couched as a lion). On some ensigns, a crown is added, and others show both a sceptre and a crown. The sceptre is mentioned in the above verses, and the sceptre and the crown refer to the kingly nature of the tribe of Judah, for the Royal House of David is descended from Judah.

Zebulun Gen.49:13 "Zebulun shall dwell at the haven of the sea; and he shall be an haven for ships; and his border shall be unto Zidon".

This verse refers to the favourable geographical position of the territory allocated to Zebulun, where ships could come in and berth safely. Thus, the bearing for Zebulun is a ship.

Issachar Gen. 49: 14-15 "Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens; And he saw that the rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute"

The tribe of Issachar was to possess rich territory, but its people became indolent and preferred to submit to tribute rather than take up the sword against their enemies. The usual bearing for Issachar is an ass couching beneath its burden.

Dan Gen. 49:16-17 "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel, Dan shall be serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horses heels, so .that his rider shall fall backward"

The usual bearing for Dan is a snake biting the heels of a horse, whose rider is about to fall off backwards. Sometimes, just a Serpent is used. According to some Bible commentators, Rabbi ibn Ezra (1092-1167) is stated as having quoted a tradition that the standard of Dan bore an eagle. Sometimes, the eagle has a serpent in its talons. We use an eagle carrying a serpent in its talons, as does the Grand Chapter of Scotland, whilst the Grand Chapter of England uses a serpent biting a horse's heels, with the rider falling of backwards.

Gad Gen. 49: 19 "Gad, a .troop shall over come him, but he shall overcome at last."

Gad had succeeded in repelling the Ammonites. Moabites and Aramaeans who were constantly raiding his borders. Jephtha (second degree Tracing Board Lecture) was of this tribe. Gad was famed for courage and success in war. and the bearing for Gad is a troop of horsemen.

Asher Gen. 49 :20 "Out of Asher his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties"

The territory of this tribe was fruitful and prolific and produced an abundance of the necessities of life and the choicest fruits. The distinctive bearing for Asher is a flourishing tree, or a golden cup or urn. The tree is probably meant to be an olive tree. and the urn or cup the vessel for storing the olive oil. The oil is a symbol of fatness or plenty.

Naphthali Gen. 49: 21 "Naphthali is a hind let loose; he giveth wordly goods."

The Revised Standard version of this verse reads "Naphthali is a hind let loose, that bears comely fawns" Other versions of the " Bible' (Vulgate, Septuagint, etc.) have slight variations of this verse, but all refer to the fecundity of the tribe and the fertility of their land. The bearing for Naphthali is a hind let loose.

Although Joseph was one of the sons of Jacob, there was no tribe with the name Joseph. His place was taken by his two sons. Ephraim and Manasseh. The Levites were not considered as being one of the twelve tribes of Israel. as they were priests with no particular territory allotted to them. Thus. the twelve tribes were named after ten of Jacob's sons and two of his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh.

Ephraim. The bearing of Ephraim is probably derived from Deuteronomy 33, often referred to as the Blessing of Moses. Verse 17 reads "His glory is like the firstling of a bullock, and is horns are like the horns of unicorns; with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth; and they are the thousands of Manasseh" The bearing of Ephraim is a bullock or ox (the firstling of a bullock)

Manasseh. The usual bearing for Manasseh is a vine by the side of a wall. This is a direct reference to the words Jacob used in his blessing of Joseph, Manasseh's father. Gen. 49:22 "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall".

Benjamin Gen. '49: 27 "Benjamin shall raven as a wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey; and at night he shall divide .the spoil." This verse refers to the warlike character of the tribe. The bearing of Benjamin is a wolf a direct reference to the verse quoted.

These then are the distinctive bearings of the twelve tribes of Israel. as usually seen. In Queensland. the bearings to be used are set down on pages 74 and 75 of the ritual. They correspond exactly with the bearings set down by the Grand Chapter of Scotland in Law 37 of their Constitution and Laws. but with this difference. On each ensign in Scotland there shall be a Hebrew word which is given in Law 37. Unfortunately, there is no translation of the Hebrew words.

The position in England is quite different. The Grand Chapter of England does not lay down an official device for each ensign. Generally speaking, the bearings used are those given above, but occasionally different bearings are seen in various chapters. For example, one chapter uses bearings for the sons of Jacob, instead of the tribes of Israel. As explained above. two of Jacob's sons, Levi and Joseph. had no tribe named after them- two of Joseph's sons. Ephraim

and Manasseh are given as the fathers of two of the tribes. Yet another difference seen in English ensigns is that that some have Latin inscriptions on them. These are usually taken from the Vulgate version of the Bible, using the appropriate verses from Genesis. but some other Latin quotations are sometimes found. Mistakes in spelling the Latin words are often found.

R. Jeffery. Grand Lecturer. January. 1990. References The Ensigns of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Harry Mendoza.