

Hetoimasia: The Empty Throne, the Preparation Throne

by Sir Knight Michael Feld

In Freemasonry, alchemy, the kabbalah, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, the act of preparation begins with a state of emptiness.

Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void..."¹



In the Taoist internal alchemy of Tai Chi, Wang Tsung-yueh wrote that Tai Chi, the Supreme Ultimate, comes from Wu Chi, the Formless Void.² The Taoist Master Chuang taught that the Taoist disciple must first be purified and then seal the gate of life and death, the trigram in the northeast corner of the Bagua.³

The same formula is used in the Buddhist Goma ritual of purification (which has existed for four thousand years in India) in which a square altar, representing the earth, is surmounted by a round stove, representing the heavens, on which all prior good and bad deeds are burned so that the mystic can attain a state of emptiness to receive purification. He has neither the guilt of past wrongs nor the pride of past good works.⁴ It is also said that one must come with an "empty cup" to receive instructions; therefore, before we can receive, we must become empty. We must divest ourselves of the "self" to be duly and truly prepared.

Hetoimasia is a Greek word meaning, "Preparation Throne" or "Empty Throne." Christian art and architecture depicted the Preparation Throne as early as the 4th Century A.D. It was a symbol used by the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine, to show that even in his absence, he still retained his authority and for his subjects to be prepared for his return. In Christian art, perhaps even before its use at the First Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., it

symbolized that while Christ had gone to prepare a place for us, he would one day return at the Second Coming, and we must be prepared for Him.

The symbol of the Empty Throne was also used in India and China to represent Buddha. In Buddhism, is an admonition similar to that made to Moses to make no graven images of God, and like Muslims who make no images of the prophet Mohammed, the empty throne was used as a symbol to avoid depicting a human image. Where the Christian hetoimasia depicts the Volume of Sacred Law, the Buddhist image depicts the wheel of dharma or the footprint of the Buddha.⁵



The hetoimasia is depicted as an empty chair, often square or rectangular, without a back or arms, and with a footstool before it. Upon it rests an open book representing the Holy Bible or the Book of Life. At times, a cross is shown on the hetoimasia. The Preparation Throne is depicted in the center of the room or in the center of the scene in works of art. The people assembled are depicted surrounding the hetoimasia.

The Ark of the Covenant; built by Moses, Aholiab, and Bezalel and carried in the midst of the people of Israel; is also said to be an empty throne, particularly the Mercy Seat. It was within the Ark rather than upon it that the Ten Commandments - the Volume of Sacred Law - was placed, and it was within the empty space between the Cherubim upon the Mercy Seat that the Shekinah or divine presence descended and the Bath-Kol, the divine voice, spoke to the High Priest.⁶ In alchemy or chemistry, the container used to process the experiment must be purged of all pollutants and elements not necessary for the process. In a properly prepared chamber, a process such as sublimation may be used to purify a compound.

For example, George Ripley wrote in his Compound of Alchemy in 1591, "Sublimations we make for three causes. The first cause is to make the body spiritual. The second is that the spirit may be corporeal and become fixed with it and consubstantial. The third cause is that from its filthy original, it may be cleansed, and its saltiness sulphurous may be diminished in it which is infectious."⁷

Having covered the antiquity, the universality, and briefly the spiritual and alchemical application of the necessity of purging, divesting, and preparing in order to receive, it is now interesting to illustrate this concept with some practical applications.

In every Lodge, Chapter, Council, Consistory, and Commandery there are empty seats waiting to be filled, but we must prepare them. There must be a Master ready to call for degree work and a prepared Lodge able to perform it. After each degree, there must be prepared teachers to instruct. After the degrees, there must be prepared positions, work and instructions, funds, scheduled events, and mentors prepared for the new workman. If we are not prepared, we will miss our opportunity.

We do not wait for Christ's return before we begin to prepare, for Jesus said, "And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. And this know, that if the goodman of the house had known at what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through. Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not." Luke 12-36:40

The same is true as we prepare for candidates in Masonry. Remember that each candidate comes to you prepared. How he is prepared is in the Entered Apprentice lesson. When will a man ask to petition Masonry? We do not know the hour; therefore, we must always be prepared.

If making Master Masons, making good men better, is the goal, then we must purge and divest all things that would pollute the process to obtain that goal. If we prepare all things for the process thereby creating a vacuum, an empty space to be filled, we know that nature abhors a vacuum, and it will be filled.

If we build the temple, the people will bring up the Ark. When we deposit the Ark, the Shekinah will descend.

If we build that spiritual building, new brothers will come to dwell in it. If we build it, they will come.

We must envision the good man who would become a Mason and put in place all those things required before his arrival. Another Taoist saying is, "when the student is ready, the master will appear." When the Lodge is ready, the candidate will appear.

As Christ went to prepare a place for us, let us prepare a place for Him. As the man seeking Masonry comes prepared to us, we must prepare for him.

Notes

1. Kings James Version Holy Bible
2. Ming, Yang Jwing. Advanced Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan. 1987. YMAA Publication Center.
3. Saso, Ph.D., Dr. Michael. Teachings of Taoist Master Chuan.
4. http://www.michaelsaso.org/?page_id=1033 accessed 1/7/12
5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hetoimasia> accessed 1/7/12
6. Haran, Menahem. Temple and Temple Services in Ancient Israel. 1985. Eisenbraus. Winona Lake, Indiana
7. <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/ripgat8.html> accessed 1/7/12

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