

The prophet Malachi also 400 years previously had spoken of him as the "messenger who would go before the face of Jehovah," and as "Elias," who would bring about a great reformation in Israel.

There is a legend in the church, that in consequence of these prophecies and the wonderful circumstances which happened at his birth, the jealousy of Herod the cruel king of Judea was aroused, and his mother was obliged to flee with him to the deserts where he was brought up in strict seclusion. We know from St. Luke, 1st 80, that he was in the deserts until the day of his showing unto Israel; and as we are aware that in these deserts there was a sect or order of people called the Essenes, who spent their lives in contemplation, and were bound together by mystic rites, it is concluded that St. John must have been brought into contact with them, joined their body and received their mystic degrees. And as it is claimed that these were essentially the same as those of the ancient order which is now styled Freemasonry, John was an honored member and patron of the craft, which all Free Masons should delight to follow.

The Saviour styled him in the text "a burning and a shining light." This refers, no doubt, to the work which his ministry accomplished, for the Lord Jesus goes on to say to the Jews, "and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light." Some suppose that the fires to which I alluded at the commencement of this discourse are kindled as commemorative of this remarkable expression of his worth and influence; and I have not the slightest doubt that many of those who kindle them are actuated by the purest sentiments of Christian devotion, but I also know that thousands are induced to build and light them with no other motive than a blind adherence to an ancient custom—that custom originating in the worship of the sun, the oldest perhaps of all religions from the fall of man. It was the religion of the Phenicians, from whom it is more than probable the Celtic race are descended; the religion which built the Round Towers and established many other superstitious rites and practices.

It is well known that christianity when it first came into contact with paganism fiercely opposed such rites, but could not entirely suppress them, owing to some deeply seated antagonism, whether inherent in the race, or what is more likely, fostered by a secret conclave or fraternity similar to, if not the very same as Freemasonry, which is claimed to have existed before the time of the patriarchs Abraham and Job, and consequently long anterior to the writings of Moses. After centuries of conflict these usages began to be tolerated, and finally became incorporated and identified with the christian religion itself, under new names and with more blessed and truthful associations. But

it may be asked what has this to do with St. John, and what are called the St. John's fires? We answer, much. The only two nativities anciently observed by the Christian Church were our Lord's (25th Dec.) and St. John the Baptist's (24th June.) How and where do we find these dates? From tradition only. The New Testament tells us in the words of the angel to Mary at the time of her conception, "this is the sixth month with her who was called barren." There were, then, exactly six months between them. Are there any important events in the solar year six months apart, with which these significant dates in the Christian Church might be synchronized which would have the effect of inducing those who were indulging in idolatrous practices on these days to turn them into Christian worship; and above all, winning that secret society of conservatives to cease their opposition and perform their time-honored rites under a truer and holier dispensation? There are.

The winter solstice, the day when the sun enters the tropic of Capricorn and apparently stands still for a few days, is the 22nd of December, so near Christmas that the two periods might well coalesce; and the summer solstice is the 22nd of June, so near St. John the Baptist's day that the heathen and christian festivals might be celebrated together, under a christian name. For the same reason, likely, Cathedrals and Round Towers are always found in Ireland in connexion. And a curious mystical idea was early suggested by the times at which the two birth-days were kept in allusion to the Baptist's own words, (John 3, 30) "He must increase but I must decrease," so that from our Lord's nativity the days begin to lengthen and from St. John's to shorten.

It may be necessary to say a few words here to guard from the misconception to which prejudice is always liable. Some persons are so anxious to fight the battle between christianity and paganism over again, that they would like to banish all festivals and rites which seem to have the slightest appearance of a heathen origin. But why? There is no error in religion but is founded on some truth implanted in human nature but greatly perverted. If days and seasons and rites have been found by all experience to be useful or necessary to the preservation of a system; why not make use of them in teaching and establishing that system which we believe to be the true one. It is supposed that many christian observances and ornaments have been borrowed from paganism, and it is, no doubt, true that some early heathen observances were taught mankind by God's implanting His immutable law in their hearts, such as worship, oblation, sacrifice, the times of new moons, etc. And if Free Masons are the successors of those societies who were banded together for the