

The Three Degrees of Discipleship

THE TWELVE DISCIPLES were divided into three groupings according to their preparation and development in discipleship. These three divisions may be listed as follows:

MASTERS DEGREE

The Three Pillars—James, Peter, John

FELLOWSHIP DEGREE

Andrew, Thomas, Matthew, Philip, Nathanael

APPRENTICE DEGREE

James (the Just), Jude, Thaddeus, Simon, Judas

Salome, sister of Mary the Virgin, married Zebedee of Capernaum, a man blessed with both material and spiritual abundance. Salome and Zebedee, together with their two sons, James and John, were very dear to the heart of Christ Jesus. This family was among His most devoted followers. Zebedee gave time and money to the cause of the new Christianity, while Salome watched over the physical needs of the Disciples. Legend relates that Salome accompanied Mary and Joseph on their hazardous flight into Egypt. She is also prominent among women disciples throughout the Gospel narrative.

THE THREE MASTERS: JAMES, PETER, AND JOHN

James, Peter, and John composed the innermost circle of the Disciples, the so-called “pillars” because sufficiently advanced to receive the deepest esoteric teaching given by the Christ.

Forcefulness, power, and strength were keywords of James’ character. Before their transformation into spiritual graces, these very attributes

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Illuminated manuscript, Boucicaut Master, early 15th cent., Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris

Saint James Major

St. James can be represented as: a barefoot apostle, holding the Gospel or his sword of martyrdom; a knight; or, most commonly, as a pilgrim, wearing a long mantle and usually a broad-brimmed hat. He often carries a water bottle and leans on a pilgrim’s staff with a large distinctive pommel. His clothing is decorated with one or more scallop-shells (“St. James’ shells”), which have become his main personal attribute. The tradition asserts that he evangelized in Spain, and that after death his body was translated to Compostela.

produced many unChristian reactions—for example, his demand that fire be brought from heaven to destroy a village that received the Master inhospitably; also his request for the most prominent place in the kingdom.

James learned quickly, however, to follow the Path wherein vengeance is superseded by love, realizing that no one can receive any permanent benefit not earned through personal effort. After his illumination it was said that “his thoughts



Illustration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, (1824-27), William Blake, National Gallery of Victoria

St. Peter and St. James with Dante and Beatrice

St. James appears from out of the sphere containing Christ's first vicars and joins Peter. He questions Dante on Hope, just as Peter had questioned him on Faith, and as John could on Love.

breathed and his words burned.”

The utter fearlessness of James, coupled with his wholehearted dedication to the Master's cause early in his discipleship, won for him the deep and abiding love of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Because of his fervent zeal, James was the first Disciple to journey into foreign lands bearing the glorious message of the Christ, and the first to follow his Lord to martyrdom. Disdaining all physical danger, he set forth for Spain, the first of the foreign lands to receive the Christ Message.

One of the supreme gifts of discipleship is actually knowing there is no time or distance to spirit. James was privileged to counsel with the beloved Mary and to receive her guidance and direction. Many times he had her protection on occasions of stress and crisis.

Upon his return from labors in Spain, blessed and holy was the glad reunion in Ephesus of James with his brother John and the divine Lady. They were aware that the days of their comradeship in the outer world were drawing to an end, and that the return of James to Jerusalem meant preparation for his martyrdom.

Mary was transported in spirit to the scene of this martyrdom. With hosts of ministering Angels, she attended and supported James in the hour of his transition. Death can hold no terror for the Initiate consciousness, for such a one has learned to partake knowingly of the waters of Eternal Life.

Joyously did this noble spirit put aside his garment of flesh. Surrounded by the transcendent glory of Angels, enfolded in the radiance and blessing of the Virgin, he too could intone in the same triumphant cry of first-hand knowledge as did another of God's anointed somewhat later, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

Following Pentecost James became head of the church in Jerusalem. His forcefulness, strength and power, now transmuted into spiritual qualities, flowered in such beauty of life and deed that when Herod, brother of the Herodias who caused the decapitation of John the Baptist, wished to suppress the new Christian heresy, the towering figure of James became the foremost target of his hostilities. Just fourteen years after the Crucifixion, James followed his Lord to liberation upon the cross of martyrdom.

According to the writings of Clement of Alexandria, as quoted by Eusebius, James had so completely transmuted vindictiveness into compassion that the man who betrayed him to Herod was inspired by James' noble attitude to become a follower and to be received into the fellowship of the little Christian church. James' last earthly act was to bestow a blessing upon this man; and his final words, addressed to Herod, were, “Peace be unto thee.”

JOHN

John was the idealist among the Disciples. He was the most highly developed of the Twelve, and so his Gospel is the most deeply esoteric of all that have survived. Chapters 14-17 contain the only written teaching we have concerning the next higher religion to succeed Christianity—known to esotericists as the “Religion of the Father”—which will draw its disciples into the realm of Divine Spirit. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John, His best beloved Disciple, were the only two sufficiently advanced to contact these high truths. A hint of this fact appears in the scene at the foot of the cross when Jesus bids Mary to look upon John as her son (in His place) and tells John to look upon Mary as his mother, thus clearly naming John as His successor on earth.

Peter was designated as the Apostle or emissary to the barbaric West, where his rugged character

and simple, straightforward intelligence made him an ideal leader and teacher. John, cultivated and scholarly, speaking the language of the Hellenic philosophers, was sent to establish his school in Ephesus, with its background of ancient civilization. It is said that Mary sojourned with him there for a time. John is the Grand Apostle of Gnosis. In the New Age he will take the place in World Christianity which Peter has occupied during the Piscean Age in the Christianity of Europe.

From a “Son of Thunder” John was transformed into the world’s most perfect example of love incarnate. His humanity was purged and cleansed in love’s all-consuming fire. His most notable work outside of his writings was founding the church at Ephesus—which was afterward led by John the Presbyter and which produced Polycarp and Ignatius, two of the most illustrious early Christians.

There is an apocryphal legend which relates that during the reign of Domitian, John was arrested and brought before the Emperor, who ordered him to drink a deadly poison. Domitian wanted to learn whether or not this Master about whom John taught would protect his Disciple. As John took the cup he said, “In Thy name, O Christ, I drink this potion. The poison Thou wilt mingle with the Holy Ghost and it will become a cup of everlasting life.” He then drank but remained calm and unharmed. When a prisoner was brought in and given the same potion, he died in convulsions almost instantly. Because of this legend sacred art has depicted John blessing a tiny winged dragon that rears its head from a chalice. Esoterically, it reminds us that John’s Gospel is correlated with the zodiacal sign of Scorpio and its

mystery of regeneration, whereby the poison of death in the blood is transmuted into the elixir of life.

The legend goes on to say that in superstitious awe the Emperor changed John’s death sentence to banishment at Patmos, the island where occurred his great initiation as described in Revelation. Upon the death of Domitian, his successor, Trajan, permitted the revered exile to return to Ephesus. The story relates that in John’s last meeting with

his followers, the youngest men bore the venerable Apostle on their shoulders to the gathering place that all might do him reverence once more. Upon his arrival he extended his hands in benediction over the assembled company and gave them this parting injunction, “Little children, love one another.”

When John knew that the time for his translation had come, he appointed Polycarp to succeed him as head of his church. Then he stood gazing heavenward and glorifying God. As the disciples departed, “they saw him sealing himself together.”

This is an initiatory phrase used to describe the process whereby a seer lifts the vibratory rhythms of both consciousness and body so he is immune to hunger, cold, disease or any other negative aspect of physical being. This

technique of spiritualization may be continued until physical substance is disintegrated or becomes invisible. This “sealing himself altogether” belongs only to the Greater Mysteries.

When the disciples returned on the morrow, John was no longer there. They found only his cloak and sandals. But where he had last stood a fountain of water was welling up, and they recalled the words of the Master to Peter: “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” (John 21: 22)



Oil on canvas, Alonso Cano (1601-1667), Louvre

St. John the Evangelist with the Poisoned Cup

This is, perhaps, the most beautiful description of all translations from earth into pure Spirit. The Disciple had learned to overcome death. In unbroken consciousness he passed from earth into heaven.

John, the best beloved of the Lord Christ, the most spiritual of His Disciples, made this glorious demonstration as the supreme ideal to be realized eventually by the entire human race. He was the first after Christ to manifest the everlasting life of those Waters the Master had given him to drink. This original Fountain he left with his own disciples at Ephesus.

PETER

Peter is said to have been tall and robust, with piercing grey eyes. His heavy dark hair encircled his broad forehead in a triple row of curls like a tiara. He was one of the most important and, perhaps, the most colorful of that immortal Twelve.

The name *Simon* means “favorable hearing.” The new name bestowed upon him by Christ was commensurate with his evolving spirituality—for *Cephas*, or Peter, means “rock.”

Eager, impulsive, inconstant, fearful are key words descriptive of the human Simon. Brave, fearless, loyal, purposeful unto death—these traits keynote the character of the spiritual *Peter*. Between these two extremes lay a path shadowed by pain, humiliation, and failure such as few have ever experienced. But it was the Path of Initiation, where on the human failings of the man were transformed into the spiritual attributes of the superman.

The restless, changing tides of the sea by which Peter spent his life seemed to beat in his blood. Simon, the early Disciple, was truly a “man of the water.” Heavy were the storms and fierce the tides needed to effect the metamorphosis from “wave man” to “rock man.”

In the Denial is to be found the first great incentive to scale spiritual heights. The darker the shadow, the brighter the light. As already mentioned, Peter never afterward heard a cock crow without tears starting to flow and again begging forgiveness. Throughout the rest of his life he eagerly welcomed every form of persecution as penance for betrayal of his Lord. After the Denial, Peter returned to Gethsemane, the scene of the Master’s recent trial, and the Garden again became a Place



Engraving, Gustave Doré (1832-1883), from *Illustrations for the Bible*

Peter Denying Christ

“In the Denial is to be found the first great incentive to scale spiritual heights. The darker the shadow, the brighter the light.”

of Agony. It was here that the true Peter was born. He came forth worthy of the promise: “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”

So wondrous were the powers of the new Peter that the sick were healed when his shadow fell upon them and wherever he abided his presence produced manifold blessings. Yet his humility increased with his greatness. The Master reprovved his arrogance in the Rite of the Footwashing but through the deep sorrow of the Denial he learned well the lesson of humility. In his First General Epistle he admonishes his disciples to be clothed with humility. This humbleness of spirit predominated to the end of his life. He even requested that he be nailed to his cross of martyrdom head downward because he was unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

Peter entered upon the great adventure of his translation in the circus of Caligula in Rome, where so many Christians bravely sacrificed their lives for their faith. (Continued) □