

Order of the Eastern Star

The Order of the Eastern Star has a tangled history. Originally conceived as an American form of Adoptive Masonry as early as the 1840s, it took until 1876 for the General Grand Chapter, Order of the Eastern Star, to be formed; and there are at least two separate organizations that both say that they are dedicated to the unification of all Eastern Stars, but which lead a separate existence from the General Grand Chapter and were founded in 1947 and 1962 respectively. There is also an African-American organization, dating from the days when American Masons officially barred blacks from membership.

The General Grand Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star was founded in 1876. It currently extends worldwide, in association (where appropriate) with the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland. It is open to Master Masons in good standing, and their female relatives over the age of 18 years. There were 2,087,063 members in 1994. Robert Morris, Master Mason, schoolteacher and poet, first attempted in the 1840s to establish Adoptive Masonry in the United States, using a ritual of his own devising. At first reviled by fellow Masons for betraying Masonic secrets, he nevertheless persisted and throughout the 1850s conferred various degrees on female relatives of Master Masons, with varying levels of cooperation from other Master Masons. His Families of the Eastern Star dated from 1857. Real acceptance was slow in coming, and it was not until Morris's rituals were revised by the Masonic publisher Robert Macoy in 1866 that any greater success came. Macoy added the degrees of Queen of the South, Past Matron's Degree and the Amaranth Degree. Even then, it was 10 years before the Central Grand Chapter was organized, and the Grand Lodge of England still does not admit that the Eastern Star has anything to do with Freemasonry.

Indeed, the U.G.L.E. has in the past threatened with expulsion any Master Mason who receives any O.E.S. Degree or serves as Worthy Patron. The order as now constituted works five degrees, based on the story of five women in the Bible — an example of the way in which organizations adhering to deism have become progressively more Christian in the United States, especially where women are involved. The slogan of the order is, "We have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him." The order even awards scholarships to those involved in religious training. The ritual also illustrates powerful patriarchal values, and, of course, the degrees must be conferred by a (male) Master Mason. The degrees are: 1. Obedience, symbolized by Adah daughter of Jephthah (daughter) 2. Devotion to religious values, symbolized by Ruth (widow) 3. Fidelity, exemplified by Esther (wife) 4. Faith in the Redeemer, symbolized by Martha sister of Lazarus (sister) 5. Charity, symbolized by Electa, identified as the "Elect Lady" in the second epistle of St. John (mother)

The initial choice of characters certainly seems strange to an outsider, as Adah was a human sacrifice, and Jephthah the Gileadite appears from the description in Judges 11 to have been an

outstandingly unattractive and inflexible fellow. In return for being allowed to win a battle against the "children of Ammon," he promised Jehovah to slaughter as an offering the first thing that came to greet him when he returned home (verses 30—31). He was apparently expecting his daughter's pet lamb, but the daughter beat the lamb to the portals. He was, therefore, convinced he ought to kill her.

Equally strangely, she wished to go to the mountains to bewail her virginity (verses 37—38), which he permitted; and when she came back two months later, not having had the sense to stay away, he killed her. It is one of the most unedifying passages in Holy Writ. Much the same form of ceremony is used for all five degrees, which are very milk-and-water compared with the Masonic originals: no swords pointed at bared breasts, no tongues torn out and bodies buried at the tide-line. A further degree, Queen of the South, is honorary. According to the Eastern Star Ritual, when a lady claims to have taken these degrees, and has given one or more of the Signs, a Mason may examine her in the following manner:

Question: "Are you a sister of the Eastern Star?" Answer: "We have seen his star in the East." Question: "For what came you here?" Answer: "We came here to worship him." Question: "Have you the cabalistic word?" Answer: "I have." Question: "Will you give it to me?" Answer: "I will, with your assistance." Question: "Begin." Answer: "No, you begin." Question: "Begin you." Answer: "F." Question: "A." Answer: "T." Question: "A." Answer: "L." Question: "Has that word any signification?" Answer: "It has, two. First, that it would be fatal to the character of any lady for truth who should dislose the secrets of these degrees unlawfully. Second, each of the letters of this word stands for one or more words, which words make the cabalistic motto." Question: "Have you the Cabalistic motto?" Answer: "I have." Question: "Will you give it to me?" Answer: "I will, with your assistance." Question: "Begin." Answer: "No, you begin." Question: "Begin you." Answer: "Fairest." Question: "Among." Answer: "Ten thousand." Question: "Altogether." Answer: "Lovely. Fairest — among — ten thousand —altogether lovely."

Note that it is the Mason who interrogates the woman, reinforcing her position of inferiority. It is not hard to sympathize with the U.G.L.E. in its disdain for the order. Functionally, the Order of the Eastern Star is something between a female version of Masonry in its own right, and an organization riding on the shirt-tails of Masonry; one cannot help wondering how many women would join without the prompting of husbands, fathers, and other male relatives. Charitable giving includes scholarships for students in religious training, and more.

Another branch or sect of the Eastern Star is the Federation of Eastern Stars, founded in 1962 and purportedly dedicated to the unification of Eastern Star orders worldwide. It had 105,000 members in 1994 and was a female auxiliary of Federation of Masons of the World. The

Federation of Eastern Stars of the World was founded 15 years earlier, in 1947, and is also purportedly dedicated to the unification of Eastern Star orders worldwide. It had 57,000 members in 1994. With such a strong fraternal spirit — two separate organizations dedicated to unity (but not with each other) and both separate from the main body, to say nothing of excluding the Prince Hall (Black) Order—it is not surprising that the Eastern Star is in decline. The total membership given above is under 2.6 million, which is less than the membership of the General Grand Chapter alone in the 1970s. The Order of the Constellation of the Junior Stars is the juvenile arm of the Eastern Star.

This order has never been active in The Netherlands before founding a Dutch female order, the Order of Weavers (Orde Vitae Feminea Textura), the founders had an idea of starting a Dutch branch of the O.E.S. This, however, was prohibited by the Dutch Grand Orient. In 1921 the degree of Amaranth became a separate order.

From the Order of the Eastern Star, a organization for young girls was founded: the Order of Rainbow for Girls. There is also the Order of Job's Daughters for girls between 13-19, of which many girls join at a later age the O.E.S.

We have published a large number of rituals and other texts of this order on our CD-Rom Adoptive Rite Library.