

THE VOLUME OF THE SACRED LAW IN MULTI-FAITH FREEMASONRY

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"In August 1938 The United Grand Lodge of England issued a statement entitled "The Aims and Relationships of the Craft" and laid down the basic principles of Freemasonry. This statement was issued in agreement with the other two Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland. This statement was again accepted and affirmed by the United Grand Lodge of England on the 7th September 1949. In this document it is stated:

The first condition of admission into, and membership of, the Order is the belief in the Supreme Being. This is essential and admits of no compromise.

The Bible, referred to by Freemasons as the Volume of the Sacred Law [VSL], is always open in Lodges. Every Candidate is required to take his Obligation on that book or on the Volume which is held by his particular creed to impart sanctity of oath or promise taken upon it.

Having taken the great and solemn obligation of a Freemason, the candidate is restored to the blessing of material light. He is then told that we acknowledge "three great, though emblematical, lights in Freemasonry. They are the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and the Compasses." Thus the first, and the most important, revelation to the Candidate in Freemasonry is to the greatest of all lights, "The Volume of the Sacred Law."

There is no doubt that in early days admission into Freemasonry was restricted to Christians. However, even though the practice of Freemasonry was restricted to Christians, except in some cases, the early references to the Volume of the Sacred Law is to the book ('librum') and not to the Holy Bible. Thus the Grand Lodge MS no. 1 dated 1583 mentions that the candidate is offered the 'book' on which to take his oath. It does not specify the 'book'. The William Watson MS mentions that an oath "must be sworn upon a book". There is a further reference in the Sloane MS 3329 of c. 1700 which mentions that the actual oath finishes with "so help you God and by the Contents of this book. So he kisses the book"

It is very likely that in the 14th and 15th centuries the 'Holy Book' or the 'book' would have been the book of the Four Gospels, as the whole Bible was not in common use until the late 16th century. The Papal Bulls of 1738 and 1751 forbade Roman Catholics from joining the Craft. Because of these Papal Bulls there were very few Catholic members of the Craft.

After the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge of England in 1717 the Order was made more open to members of other nations and other religions provided they subscribed to the ancient charges. The "Ancient Charges" were reproduced in the Books of Constitutions. Charge 1 has always been referring to "God and Religion". This Charge in 1756 read "But though in ancient times Masons were charged in every country to be of the religion of that country or nation, whatever it was, yet it is now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves."

The Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813 provided a perfect opportunity to revise many of the rules and regulations as well as controversial references to religious matters in the craft ritual. References to the Christian faith were avoided or removed. The Lodge of Reconciliation as well as the members of the United Grand Lodge of England did take into account various faiths prevalent in various parts of the Empire at the time. The article in the Ancient Charges said " Let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the order, provided he believe in the glorious architect of heaven and earth, and practises the sacred duties of morality".

In India the Province of Bengal most notoriously prohibited the initiation of any Asiatic without the personal approval of the Provincial Grand Master. (Provincial Grand Lodge By-Law no. 55). I will not go into the history of Freemasonry in India here. It is sufficient to note here that the first Indian Freemason was the Nawab of Carnatic in 1775. The next one according to historians was made in 1812 and another two were initiated, one in 1834 and the other in 1836. The doors of Freemasonry were opened to all Indians after the 1860's. Particular difficulties were raised about obligations of a Hindu candidate. This was mainly due to misunderstanding of the Hindu religion by the Europeans in those days.

By this time it was agreed that The Bible is regarded as the Volume of the Sacred Law. By the late 18th Century more and more Masons came to regard the Holy Bible as the only Volume of the Sacred Law. This belief became so firm that even today in ordinary English or Scottish Lodges any reference to the Volume of the Sacred Law is immediately taken as reference to the Holy Bible. In Scottish Lodges the office of the Bearer of the Sacred Law is termed as the "Bible Bearer". Most Masons in this country do not have any idea about other faiths and sometimes show gross ignorance about beliefs of other members of the Lodge and about their Volumes of the Sacred Law.

Members of other faiths did not raise any objections to The Declaration of Aims and Relationships of the Craft made in 1949. It was assumed that the people of other faiths concur with the present situation. Although the above Declaration of the United Grand Lodge was to remove any doubt as to the administration of the obligation of a mason, it did not declare or confirm that other Volumes on which the Candidate takes his obligation, such as the Bhagvad Gita, the Quran or the Sacred Books of other faiths, should be regarded as the Volumes of the Sacred Law. In this country the practice has evolved, that when any candidate, or the Master Elect of the Lodge, who is not of Christian faith, is being initiated or being obligated, to arrange for the Volume of the Sacred Law of his faith to be placed on the Pedestal. Let us examine the practice in countries where Lodges have members of more than one faith.

In India the Lodges, under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of India, and those under English Constitution, arrange to keep five Volumes of the Sacred Law opened at the same time. The Volumes are opened side by side and are placed separately on the pedestal. The Volumes are the Holy Bible, the Bhagvad Gita, the Quran, the Granth, and the Zend Avesta. The Square and Compasses are placed on all the Volumes or on the Volume to which the WM owes allegiance, except on Installation nights when they will be placed on the Volume on which the Master-Elect will take his obligation. Candidates for Initiation, Passing and Raising will take their obligation on the Volume of their Faith.

Similarly in the Singapore Lodge, under the English Constitution, four different Volumes of the Sacred Law are opened on the pedestal at any one time. It should be noted that the Volume of the Sacred Law on which the Candidate takes his obligation should be so arranged that he should be easily able to recognise it and read it at the appropriate time.

East Africa will be celebrating the Centenary of Freemasonry in the District in 2003. Here a Lodge called the Orient Lodge no.3703 was formed in 1914 to admit Asians. At the first meeting of the Lodge five Asian candidates were initiated into Freemasonry. The membership in the District has since been of multifaiths. The Holy Bible is regarded as the Volume of the Sacred Law but is always accompanied by the Holy Book of the candidate or the Master Elect and both are laid open on the pedestal side by side. As a matter of interest I was initiated in the Orient Lodge no. 3703 in August 1960 and am still a subscribing member of the Lodge.

In Lodges under the Grand Lodge of Turkey, it is imperative that three Volumes of the Sacred Law are opened on the WM.'s Pedestal. The Quran, the Old and the New Testaments, with Square and Compasses on each of them or on the Book of the WM's faith.

In England, so far most English freemasons have been either Christians or Jews. Both of them have been happy to accept the Holy Bible as the Volume of the Sacred Law. However, in modern times the situation is changing fast. Thirty or forty years ago it was an isolated incident when a person other than a Christian or

a Jew sought membership of a Lodge. With the growth of a multi ethnic population in Britain and particularly with the arrival of East African Asians the situation has changed. Many Lodges do have members of different faiths. On occasions the candidate is not aware of the procedure and neither the proposer nor the seconder has made any attempt to ascertain from the candidate the appropriate Volume of the Sacred Law on which he would take his obligation. In such cases the candidate ends up taking an obligation on the Holy Bible to which he does not subscribe. I have tried to explain to the Lodges and the members which Holy Books are relevant to which faith. It is proper that English freemasons should understand that we now live in a multifaith society and therefore there is a need to make themselves familiar with other faiths and their respective Volumes of the Sacred Law. As in most Lodges the members are familiar with its members being either Christians or Jews, I would like to remind you that although most of the Jewish fraternity would be content to take an obligation on the Holy Bible which contains Old and New Testaments, it should be noted that the correct Volume of the Sacred Law for Jewish brethren is the collection of writings known as the Torah. The proper book should be in Hebrew and not in English.

Most of the Christian freemasons think that all the Hebrew writings are contained in the Old Testament of the Bible. This is not so. For this reason it is better to have a Torah in Hebrew for a devout and practising Jew as the only Volume of the Sacred Law. The oath taken on the Old Testament which contains the chapters from Genesis to Malachi is regarded as second best by devout and practising brethren, but it is good enough for the liberal members of the faith. Also a Jewish candidate stands covered during his obligation and does not kneel. It has also been pointed out that an Orthodox Jew would affirm and will not take an obligation in present form.

The Papal Bulls of the late 18th century forbade Roman Catholics from joining freemasonry. They are, however, now permitted to join the Craft. Again the Holy Bible, normally used in our Lodges is not the correct Bible for them. For a Roman Catholic the whole Bible is one which contains the Old and the New Testaments together with certain additional writing which are referred to as the "Apocrypha". A devout Catholic would be very pleased if the D.C. or his proposer or seconder took a little trouble to get the right Holy Book.

For a Hindu candidate the Volume of the Sacred Law is the Rig Veda. The first and most ancient of the four Vedas. However today Bhagvad Gita (the Celestial Song) is regarded by all Hindus as their Book of the Sacred Law. The Bhagvad Gita is given in form of dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna and consists of only 701 verses. The Bhagvad Gita is the cream and essence of all Vedic teachings. It explains to us in an unambiguous and succinct manner the deep and sacred principles of the sacred science of the SELF. After imparting the knowledge of the human body and the Cosmos, it acquaints every human being with the most perfect and complete knowledge of the self. Perhaps you would remember the Charge in the third degree which mentions "that most interesting of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself".

Muslim candidates take their obligation on the Quran. It comprises 114 Suras or Steps. Muslims believe that it is the word of Almighty God as revealed to Prophet Mohammed (b.c.570AD in Mecca) by Archangel Gabriel. The scriptures of the Quran preach monotheism, strict obedience to God and His Word or the Quran. There are many parallels to the Old and New testaments in the Quran. It acknowledges that Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Jesus were Prophets or Messengers of God. In the Quran they are called Ebrahim, Ishmael, Musa and Issa. However, the Quran proclaims that there is but one God and Mohammed is His prophet. Allah revealed His will and word to Mohammed only. The Holy Quran which is being used as the Volume of the Sacred Law should be with the original Arabic text. There are many English versions these days but the version regarded Holy is the one with the Arabic text.

The "Guru Granth Sahib" is the Holy Book of the Sikhs. It contains the teachings of the founder of the Sikh faith Guru Nanak and other Gurus. It was compiled by Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth of the nine Gurus of the Sikhs in the 17th century. It centres on the philosophy that the holy "word" or "name" is the most sacred and it should always be repeated to oneself. Guru Granth Sahib is highly revered by the Sikhs. If the Granth Sahib is opened in any room then one can only enter the room with his or her head covered. The Granth Sahib is always veiled unless it is being recited or read by a 'Gnani' (a devotee). There are very few translations in

English of the full Granth and most of the candidates are content to take an obligation on the abridged version of the Holy Book called the "Gutka". It is important to note that all three faiths do not approve sealing the obligation by kissing the Volume of the Sacred Law. Kissing the book would be a sign of disrespect. Instead it should always be touched with the forehead, signifying the Candidate's obedience to the divine teachings and his submission to the obligation as a divine command, binding on him so long as he shall live.

The next one is the Zoroastrian faith of Parsee or Persian candidates. Parsee is the derivation of Persian. Parsees fled Persia during their religious persecution in the 16th Century. They came to India where they were received with open arms. They made their home in India. They were the first community to adopt the western life and culture. They were highly educated. It is worth noting here that in 1843 Maneckji Cursetji was initiated in a French Lodge, because he was not accepted by any of the English Lodges in India. He later applied to join a Scottish Lodge. His application was turned down. As a result, a new Lodge called the Lodge of Rising Star of Western India, was consecrated in December 1843 with Robert Burns as the first Master. The Lodge is still going strong. I visited the Lodge in 1962. The members are still all Parsees. Also so far only one Indian has ever occupied an elected office in the United Grand Lodge of England. In 1830 W. Bro. Cama, a Parsee was elected as the Treasurer by the Grand Lodge of England. The Volume of the Sacred Law of Parsees is called the Zend Avesta. It is a collection of traditional teachings originating from the 6th to the 4th century BC. The teachings relate to the existence, power and strength of Ahuramazda - the Lord of the whole Universe. The English translation of the Zend Avesta is hard to come by and if there is a Parsee Candidate he should be requested to obtain a copy which is Sacred to him.

Buddhism is another faith widely practised in the East. In recent years there have been many British people who have embraced this faith. There is a Buddhist temple in Richmond, where it will be easier to find an approved version their Sacred Book which is called the "Tripitaka" (or the Cannons). There are two branches of Buddhism, the Hinayana and the Mahayana. The followers of the Hinayana Branch (those of Lower Teachings) do not acknowledge and do not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. Therefore they are not considered eligible to be made masons. On the other hand, the followers of Mahayana Branch (those of Higher Teachings) do profess a belief in the Supreme Being and as such are eligible for admission to our Order.

Having considered various Volumes of the Sacred Law used in various parts of the world either under the English, Scottish or Irish Constitutions, let us consider how the Volume of the Sacred Law should be placed on the WMs pedestal. It would be appropriate for Lodges where there are members besides those of Christian and Jewish faiths to display the Volumes of other faith with the same respect and reverence as the Bible on the WM.'s pedestal. At times there is not enough room on the Pedestal. In such cases it would be appropriate to replace the Holy Bible with the Volume on which the Master Elect or the candidate is going to take his obligation. On completion, the selected Volume of the Sacred Law can remain on the pedestal for the rest of the meeting or be replaced with the Holy Bible. As already stated, Jewish candidates do not kneel but stand with their headscovered. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs kneel but do not kiss the book to affirm their obligation. They should seal it by touching the Volume of the Sacred Law with their foreheads. However, this is ignored in most Lodges because often the brethren are not familiar with the rules governing the reverence given to particular Holy Books.

Finally, I would like to appeal to the members of the Craft that they should show respect and reverence to the most important symbol in the Lodge. In so many Lodges, changing the position of the Square and Compasses is done very casually from the left side of the WM. The proper way is to come to the front of the pedestal, give a court bow and then attend to the Square and Compasses. The same procedure should be used at the opening and closing of the Lodge. One should never ever place one Volume of the Sacred Law over another, either in part or in full. The WM should also never put any papers on the Volume of the Sacred Law. These are signs of total disrespect for the Sacred Writings.

Before I close, I would like to mention that Scottish Lodges have been more tolerant and have been ready to accept the Sacred Volumes of other faith and thus admit members of non Christian faiths to the Order. In most Scottish Lodges overseas, Freemasonry among the natives came much sooner than in other Constitutions. The position in America is mixed. Some Grand Lodges in America adhere to the principle that the faith and belief of a man should be no bar to his admission into Freemasonry as long as he admits his belief in a Supreme Being. Other American Grand Lodges do not permit the use of other Holy Books as the Volume of the Sacred Law and thus would not permit admission of non-Christians into a Lodge. In 1979, the Grand Lodge of California, rejected a law that would have allowed candidates to choose the Book of their own faith on which to take the Obligation of a Mason. On the other hand the Grand Lodges of Kansas and Ohio, do accept candidates of other faiths and would permit them to take the Obligation on the Holy Book of their faith.

Finally, except for the brief reference to the American Grand Lodges, other constitutions, particularly the Scottish and the Irish have not been covered in detail. They have played an important part in the development of Freemasonry in the Overseas territories particularly amongst the natives of those countries. Hopefully someone will undertake a detailed and comprehensive study of the subject at some future date." A

cknowledgements:

Gould's History of Freemasonry.

Freemasons' Guide and Compendium by B.E. Jones

Ars Quarter Coronati. Vols. 90, 97, 106 etc

The Craft in the East by Haffner.

Also note that every Jurisdiction varies in what the VSL is 'acceptable'. It is best to refer to your Grand Lodge's Book of Constitutions or inquire with your Grand Secretary & confer with the prospective candidate about the 'custom' & regulations.

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