THE VOLUME OF SACRED LAW

The background of the Bible and other Sacred text upon the altar in Masonic Lodges.

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Worshipful Ivan Smith, The Master of Cataract Lodge has asked that several books be displayed upon the alter during his term of office to represent the several books held by our members to be sacred. He also asked that I develop a presentation to explain the term Volume of the Sacred Law or VSL and how it relates to masonry.

The furniture of the lodge includes in all cases a Volume of the Sacred Law or VSL providing spiritual guidance to its membership. In Minnesota the Grand Lodge of Minnesota has codified the requirements at Section S1.19 wherein the heading Volume of the Sacred Law- elaborates the Grand Lodge Position. “An open volume of the Sacred Law, ‘the rule and guide of life’ is an essential part of every Masonic meeting. The Volume of the Sacred Law to a Christian is the bible; to masons of other faiths it is the book held holy by them.”

The web site “The Masonic Trowel” a publication of the Provincial Grand Lodge of New South Wales has published an extensive treatise on the VSL. Much of what follows is available on their web site.

The first condition of admission into our fraternity and continued membership in the order is belief in the Supreme Being. Every candidate is required to take his obligations on the book or volume that is held by his particular creed to impart sanctity to an oath or promise taken upon it. As held in the Minnesota code – it is an essential part of any Masonic meeting.
Our ritual proves the importance of the VSL when it teaches us several useful lessons.

- The VSL teaches the all-important duties we owe to God, our neighbors and ourselves;
- The VSL is to be regarded as the unerring standard of Truth and Justice;
- The VSL teaches us to believe in the wise dispensation of Divine Providence;
- It is to rule and govern our faith;
- It may be regarded as the Spiritual Trestle Board of the Grand Architect of the Universe;
- And the VSL is one of the Great lights in Masonry.

Despite the importance we as Speculative Masons attach to the VSL, the records that have come down to us make no reference to the Bible or sacred writings in ritual or in ceremony before the 18th century. This is not to say our forebears were not religious – but their faith was not clearly evident in the written record.

The Regius Manuscript, one of the earliest Masonic writings dating to about 1390, was written in priestly language and contains the following messages:

- A mason must love God well and his Holy Church.
- Masons loved God well and all His lore and were in His service evermore.

Similarly the Cooke Manuscript – said to be the second oldest Masonic writing from about 1420 refers to:

- Man’s debt to his God.
- An Invocation of the Trinity at the beginning of a meeting;
• A closing prayer;
• And in particular a Mason is required to love God and the Holy Church and all her Saints.

Many of the old Manuscripts, constitutions or “old charges” – documents outlining the practices and requirements of operative masons contain instructions prescribing the form of administering an oath. One of the earliest of these instructions was printed in Latin in 1583 was translated as:

“Therefore one of the elders holds out a book and he or they (that are to be sworn) shall place their hands upon it and the following precepts shall be read:”

This instruction is very much like our practice of swearing an oath in court, but it cannot be assumed that the book referenced was the Bible. It may be the book of constitutions or charges since Bibles were not readily available in 1583. The first printing of the Bible in Great Britain took place in 1535 and fifty years later was still limited to churches and not readily available.

The Colne Manuscript No. 1 from the town of Colne in north east Lancashire describes the manner in which a candidate should receive the charge. This refers to the oath or obligation taken in 1685:

“One of the eldest, taking the Bible shall hold it forth that he or they which are about to be made Masons may impose and lay their right hand upon it and the charge shall be read.”
This reference appears to be the first specific reference to the Bible as the VSL in the surviving Masonic documents.

Many of the later documents point out the importance of the VSL in Masonic ceremonies and in particular the obligation of the candidate. For example the Edinburgh Register Manuscript of 1696 describes the form of giving the “Masons’s Word” as:

You are to take the person to take the word upon his knees, and after a great many ceremonies...you make him take up the Bible and laying his right hand upon it, you are to conjure him to secrecy...

In Samuel Pritchard’s 1730 exposure of masonic ritual “Masonry Dissected, he similarly describes the taking of the obligation as “my naked right hand on the Holy Bible; there I took the obligation (or oath) of a Mason.”

It is apparent from these early writings that the importance of the Volume of Sacred Law – in this case the Holy Bible, had been clearly established early in the 18th century and were likely standard practice at the formation of the Grand Lodge in 1717.

Although there seems to be no surviving evidence of definite instructions by the Grand Lodge of England or any official act of adoption by the grand lodge, it is fairly clear that the term Volume of Sacred Law was adopted about 1723 as a common title for the Holy Books of all religions – a term giving no offense to the adherents of any particular religion. The use of vague
terms is also apparent in charge 1 of the charges in the 1723 Book of Constitutions by Dr. James Anderson:

“CONCERNING GOD AND RELIGION – A Mason is obligated by his tenure to obey the Moral Law and if he rightly understands the art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine, 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 tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves; that is to be good men and true, or men of honor and honesty, by whatever Denominations or persuasions they may be distinguished, whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union and the means of conciliating true friendship among persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance. “

A close reading of our ritual reveals that the VSL is referred to as part of the furniture of the lodge and also one of the three great lights. The inconsistency is explained by the development of our ritual. The sacred writings were first referred to as the furniture of the lodge about 1730. A few years later we find the Bible, Square and Compass referred to as Pillars of the lodge. The first known reference to them as the Great Lights in Masonry is found in France in 1745 in passing reference while discussing the Lesser Lights. The first appearance of the VSL, Square and Compass as the three great lights appears in English writings
in about 1760, and this usage was confirmed by the Lodge of Reconciliation established in 1823 to settle the differences in the ritual due to the merger of the Antients and the Moderns. This reconciliation solidified the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England.

Our Brother Paul Bessel of Washington DC has written extensively on the topic of religion in Freemasonry and provides evidence of 28 separate Volumes held sacred in various parts of the world. All can be found on Masonic altars, but few have more than one. Singapore Lodge working under the English Constitutions has no fewer than six volumes routinely displayed representing the faiths of their international membership. As the VSL is not routinely read within the lodge, its particular teachings are of little importance on the altar—it is a symbol and a symbol only displayed with two other of our symbols, the square and compass.

The elaboration of the 28 volumes would keep us here far too late, but mention of the common volumes is illuminating. We are all aware of the presence of the Bible so I will devote little attention to it other than to say—in our Grand Lodge the Old Testament portions are the parts most valued in the blue lodge.

The second most common VSL in Minnesota would probably be the Torah—a text largely consisting of the first five Old Testament chapters and forming the basis for Judaism.
The Holy Koran is the book revered by Muslims, and requires additional attention if it is to be displayed or handled – even in lodge. A Muslim may only handle the Holy Koran with his bare hands after he has undergone a full ceremonial washing. If the Koran is to be displayed it is recommended that it be wrapped and treated with proper respect. It should be displayed only when practicing Muslims are present and any Muslim candidate should be notified and full discussion of procedures should be accomplished before any degree work.

The Sikh religion was founded by Nanek Guru who was born in 1469. His tenth and last successor Govind was assassinated in 1708 and the line of gurus declared extinct. The spiritual leadership of its followers is vested in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib – or Holy Book as God’s representative on earth. Sikh spiritual leaders have found Masonry to be consistent with their teachings but sealing an obligation with a kiss is not permitted. The ritual bow in obedience to the book is considered the most sacred vow a Sikh adherent can make.

The Holy Bagvad Gita is held as a VSL by the Hindu. The Gita dates to 200 BC and establishes a permanent compromise between the belief in a personal God and the conception of an impersonal and All Pervading Absolute. There are other primary Hindu writings originating 1500-1200 BC but they do not acclaim the doctrines of a single
Deity. The Gita may be opened and touched with the bare hands but not the lips. Candidates should be instructed to salute it in the manner customary to their faith – which is by placing the hands upon the Gita, bringing them to the forehead and then to the chest with the palms together.

The Buddhist hold Holy 31 books that comprise the Tripitaka, the three baskets which contain the essence of Buddha’s teaching. Only one is held as the Volume of Sacred Law – the Dhammapada. It consists of 423 melodious Pali verses, set out in 26 vargas or chapters and is generally considered one of the most perfect ethical manuals. Buddhist sects may find other volumes more important but the Dhammapada has been accepted by the Grand Lodge of England and is acknowledged acceptable for obligating candidates.

As previously noted, Brother Paul Bessel’s extensive research is available from his website at bessel.org. He includes links to various texts and identifies six different versions of the Bible plus the book of Mormon as in common use in Masonic Lodges.

Freemasonry is non-sectarian and non-doctrinal in character. We accept men of all faiths and beliefs who can agree on the moral law – to be good men and true and men of honor and integrity. The presence of the VSL on the altar may appear to be inconsistent with these tenets, but the existence of the Bible on the altar of our
Minnesota lodges does not provide evidence that all present are Christian. Its presence is yet another Masonic Symbol – symbolic of all the great books of religious teaching which may have significance to groups of people.

We routinely display several books and can obtain more if needed to properly initiate candidates. Once initiated the symbolism of the Bible as the common book upon the altar is representing the ritual Volume of Sacred Law held dear by all Masons. Thank you for your attention.