

THE VOLUME OF SACRED LAW

If you were asked, "What do you consider the most important feature of Freemasonry?" you would undoubtedly say, "The Volume of the Sacred Law is essential to the institution of Freemasonry". You would back up your opinion by quoting an extract from The Aims and Relations of the Craft, first issued by the United Grand Lodge of England, and later agreed to by the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland. This is the extract:

The first condition of admission into, and membership of, the Order is belief in the Supreme Being; the Bible, the Volume of the Sacred Law, is always open in Lodges. Every candidate is required to take his obligation on that book or the Volume that is held by his particular creed to impart sanctity to an oath or promise taken upon it.

But you don't even need that, because our Ritual proves it for us. You will recall what it says about the VSL.

- * It teaches us the all-important duties we owe to God, to our neighbors and ourselves;
- * Is to be regarded as the unerring standard of Truth and Justice;
- * Teaches us to believe in the wise dispensation of Divine Providence;
- * Is to rule and govern our faith;
- * May be regarded as the Spiritual TB of the GAOTU;
- * Is one of the Great Lights of Freemasonry.

Despite the importance we, as Speculative Freemasons, attach to the VSL, we are surprised to learn that the records that have come down to us make no reference to the Bible or sacred writings or whatever name it is known by as occupying a particular place in Lodge ceremonial before the late 1600's. This does not mean to say that there was no religious background to the ceremonies of our Masonic forebears.

In fact we have proof that there was The Regius Manual Script, an operative document thought to date from about 1390, and written in priestly language contains charges and statements such as these:

- * He must love God well and Holy Church.
- * They loved God well and all His lore and were in His service evermore.

Similarly, the second oldest of the surviving early Masonic manuscripts, the Cooke Manual Script. (about 1420) refers to:

- * Man's debt to God.
- * An invocation of the Trinity at the beginning, and a Closing Prayer, and in particular, says a Mason is required:
- * To love God and Holy Church and all Saints.

In addition to these, many of the old Manual Scripts, Constitutions, or "Old Charges" - documents concerned with operatives' practices and requirements - contain instructions, often in Latin, prescribing a form of administering the oath. The earliest of these instructions appears in the Grand Lodge Manual Script, dated 1583. Translated from the Latin, its opening passage begins:

"Then 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 is very much like our present day practice of swearing on oath in Court, but it cannot be assumed that the "Book" here referred to is the Bible. It may be the "Book of Charges" - ie, a copy of the Constitutions - for it is to be remembered that the first complete Bible in Britain was not printed until 1535, and only fifty years later would not have been widely available.

The Colne Manual Script No 1, which appeared in about 1685, describes the manner in which a Candidate should receive the Charge. This refers to the oath or obligation taken.

"One if the eldest taking the Bible shall hold it forth that he or they which are to be made Masons may impose and lay their right hand upon it and then the Charge shall be read".

This appears to be the first clear reference to the VSL in the surviving Masonic documents.

Many of the later documents point out the importance attached to the VSL in Masonic ceremonies, and, in particular, in the taking of the Obligation by the Candidate. Here are two examples:

The Edinburgh Register Manual Script, of 1696, in describing "The forms of giving the Mason Word", says: '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 sec(r)ecie...'

Samuel Prichard's exposure, "Masonry Dissected", of 1730, describes the taking of the Obligation in somewhat similar terms:

'... my naked Right Hand on the Holy Bible; there I took the Obligation (or oath) of a Mason'.

We can see from these the central place of the sacred writings in the ceremonies of the early Speculative Freemasons had thus been clearly established by the first few decades of the 18th Century.

Although there seems to be no evidence of any definite instructions by the Grand Lodge of England, or any official act of adoption by that body, it is fairly clear the term V of the SL was adopted somewhere about 1723 or just after, as a common title for the Holy Books of all religions - a term giving no offence to the adherents of any particular religion. But we cannot rule out that the use of the terms was associated with Charge 1 of the Charges in the 1723 Book of Constitutions. This provided, among other things, that

... though in ancient times Masons were charg'd in every country to be of the religion of that country or nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves ...

A close reading of the Ritual reveals that the VSL is referred to both as part of the furniture of the Lodge, and also one of the Great Lights. This apparent inconsistency reflects one aspect of the development of our ceremonies. The sacred writings were first referred to as part of the furniture of the Lodge about 1730. A little later we find the Bible, Square and Compasses described as Pillars of the Lodge. The first known reference to Great Lights is to be found in France in 1745 but this meant what are now called Lesser Lights. The first reference to the VSL Square and Compasses as the Three Great Lights

appears in English writings about 1760, and this usage was confirmed by the Lodge of Reconciliation set up in the early 1800's to settle differences of practice at the time of the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England.

Freemasonry is non-sectarian and non-doctrinal in character. The presence of the VSL, on the altar of a Lodge may, therefore, appear at first glance at odds with this basic concept. But the VSL on our altars in New South Wales is not to be regarded as evidence that the Lodges of this Jurisdiction are Christian in character, although it is, of course, true that the majority of Lodge members are essentially Christian in their affiliations. Its presence is no more than a symbol, a representative of all the great books of the religious teachings, which have particular significance to particular groups of people. In some Jurisdictions other works replace the Bible on the altar. Singapore Lodge, a Lodge working under the English Constitution, uses no fewer than six Vs of SL of different faiths. As one Scottish Grand Lodge authority puts it: "The Volume of the Sacred Law, no matter though it be our Bible or the Sacred Writings of the Hindu, the Zendavesta of the Parsee, or the Koran of the Mohammedan, typifies the Mind or Will of the GAOTU, the Great First Cause - the Creator and Preserver of the Universe - the Great Life-Giver, that Great Unknown and Unknowable which is manifested in His Universe. As the VSL is not read in our Lodges, its teachings per se are of no consequence. It is a symbol and a symbol only, and it is shown as supporting the other two symbols, the Square and Compasses.

...for us it is an open Book, with only one word written thereon, and that word is "GOD".