

VSL

Three Small Letters, One Big Concept

The VSL, or Volume of Sacred Law, one of our Three Great Lights, has not always been a part of Freemasonry. The term seems to have been adopted around 1723. There was no edict or instruction from the first Grand Lodge of England, but like much of what we now consider established Freemasonry, it probably came from James Andersons' "The Constitutions of the Free-Masons" written in that year. Before then, in England and all other Christian countries, it was the Holy Bible. But even that book only takes us back less than two hundred years as the Bible, especially an English language one was not even published until 1526, by William Tyndale, and then it was only the New Testament. The use of this book in a Masonic Lodge would have been hazardous as, and I quote, "One risked death by burning if caught in mere possession of Tyndale's forbidden books." The earliest manuscripts that relate to Masonry and contain references to ritual simply refer to it as "the book" or "a book", and that was probably their book of Constitutions and Charges.

Why the change to Volume of Sacred Law rather than just saying The Holy Bible, after all, that's what is on all of our altars today isn't it? One of the great changes that came into Speculative Masonry with the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge and Anderson's Constitutions was the removal of religion from the Craft. In part it reads "... 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 ..." Masons were no longer required to be of the one religion of their country, but rather to share a belief in a Grand Architect of the Universe or a Supreme Entity, by whatever name you wished to use.

What is the purpose of this Volume of Sacred Law? Well, looking through our ritual you will find that among other things:

It teaches us the all-important duties we owe to God, to our neighbours and ourselves;

It is to be regarded as the unerring standard of Truth and Justice;

It is to be used to rule and govern our faith;

It is an essential part of the obligation of each degree;

Just like in a Court of Civil Law, each obligation includes the swearing of an oath with the right hand resting on the book to make it binding upon the individual. It works because the book has meaning and is sacred to the individual taking the oath.

But what if the man is not a Christian and the Bible has no meaning for him? That is why it is now called the Volume of Sacred Law, because whichever book is held sacred to that person can be used, it need not be the Bible. In Lodges in predominately Christian countries, it is the Holy Bible, but Lodges in other countries have the sacred book of their predominate religion on the Altar as their Volume of Sacred Law. One of the beauties of Masonry and our tolerance of any religion that acknowledges a Supreme Entity is that we can accept Brothers of different faiths and accommodate them by also having their sacred book open on our Altar. I regularly sit in a Lodge with two VSL's open on the altar. Let's have a quick look around the globe at some Lodges in non-Christian countries to see which books they use and some of the differences in how they are used.

The following is mainly taken from an article written in 1992 by V.W. Bro. Lin Boon Par, based upon an earlier paper by Wor. Bro. F. W. Stephens, presented in 1970, with some additions and modifications by myself.

There are seven Volumes of the Sacred Law in common use in varying numbers through the East. They are in alphabetical order: (1) The Bible (OT) for the Jews. (2) The Bible (OT & NT) for Christians. (3) The Dhammapada for the Mahayana Sect of Buddhism. (4) The Gita for Hindus. (5) The Granth Sahib for Sikhs. (6) The Koran for Muslims. (7) The Zenda Avesta for Parsees and some Iranians.

In 1992, when this article was written, it was thought that Lodge Singapore No. 7178, English Constitution, was the only lodge to have all seven of them. All are open on the pedestal and each is treated with the same respect and they are, in every way, equal to one another. In the Grand Lodge of India, where there are six VSL's, the Square and Compasses are placed on the VSL of the faith of the presiding officer (WM, RGM or GM) at all meetings except at installation meetings when they are placed on the VSL of the faith of the Master Elect. In Israel, where there are three VSL's, the Square and Compasses are placed on the old testament. If Christians are present, the New Testament is added. If Muslims are present the Koran is added and one large set of Square and Compasses covers them all. I will add that in our jurisdiction, the Tanakh is used for Jews.

Because of the differences in customs in various religions, modifications are required in the method of obligation. In general, an obligation should be taken and sealed in such a way that the candidate regards it as unconditionally binding. The Christian Bible was originally used for obligating candidates only. It was not until 1760 that it became, on the proposition of William Preston, part of the "furniture" of the lodge. Now, of course it is always open in lodges at labour. The present day method of obligating candidates on the Bible is well known. The posture is peculiar to Freemasonry, viz, kneeling with his right hand on the VSL and the left in a position varying with the degree. In the English Constitution, the Bible is placed on the Worshipful Master's pedestal though in some lodges in England it may be placed on a special altar in front of the pedestal. In the other two British Constitutions, it is placed on a separate altar in the centre of the lodge room. In the Irish Constitution, additional VSL's are placed one on each of the pedestals of the principal officers. The Bible is opened at the Old Testament. New Brunswick is an exception to this as the Scripture opened on, and used for the Second Degree comes from Corinthians in the New Testament. There is no official Grand Lodge ruling as how it should be placed or to the page at which it should be opened.

The Holy Book of the Muslims is the Holy Koran, but as regards touching and sealing it, the overall picture is rather difficult as customs vary in different countries. A Muslim may only touch the Holy Koran with his bare hands after he has undergone a full ceremonial washing. Advice was sought from the Iman of Kedah in 1952. He recommended that the candidate should be obligated with the Koran held above his head by another Muslim brother. If he is afterwards required to seal it with his lips the Book should be wrapped up so that the lips do not actually touch it. The words "hereby and hereon" should be changed to "hereby and hereunder." This is the usual method of obligating Muslims in Singapore. The Koran is always kept wrapped up. Another method is to place the wrapped Koran on the pedestal and the candidate places his hand on it (as with the Bible); the only difference is that the bare hand does not touch the Koran directly. This method is not so commonly used. You will note that the Koran, being wrapped up, is not open in lodge. In other places, another method may be used. Some members consider that the method of dealing with this problem should be in exactly the same manner as for the Holy Bible with the exception that the Holy Koran should not be touched with the hands unless covered with gloves. The only point is that the candidate does not wear gloves but he can touch the Koran provided he has purified himself prior to entering the lodge after the manner of his religion. He is always so informed by his sponsors.

The Sikh religion was founded by Nanek Guru who was born in 1469 AD. His tenth and last successor Govind, assassinated in 1708, declared the line of gurus extinct and the spiritual leadership vested in the Granth Sahib or Holy Book as God's representative on earth. A Sikh religious leader stated (in 1952) that there is no objection to touching the Book but sealing it in the accepted Masonic Manner with the lips is NOT permitted. He suggested that a candidate could bow in obedience toward the Book.

The Gita goes back 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 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 hands, but not with the lips. Candidates should therefore be instructed to salute it in the manner customary to their faith, which is by placing the hands on the Gita, bringing them to the forehead and then to the chest with the palms together. The Gita was only established as a representative Hindu VSL at the beginning of the 20th century.

There are two sects of Buddhists: the first, the Hinayana Sect: Mainly in India, Thailand and Ceylon, do not believe in a Supreme Being and hence are not eligible to be Freemasons. The second, the Mahayana Sect: Mainly in China, Korea and Japan, do believe in a Supreme Being. Their book is the Dhammapada, which is one of the 31 books that comprise the Tripitaka, the Three Baskets that contain the essence of Buddha's teachings. However, in lodges in Kuala Lumpur, the Holy Koran is used for Muslims and the Bible for all others (Christians and non-Christians). It has been asked, "what is the validity of an obligation taken by a candidate on the VSL not of his faith, specifically by a Buddhist on the Bible?" United Grand Lodge of England Constitutions, paragraph four of Aims and Relationships of the Craft states: "The Bible, referred to by Freemasons as the Volume of the Sacred Law, is always open in the lodge. 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 to an oath or promise taken upon it." A Buddhist takes an obligation by going to the temple to pray, after which he makes his obligation. There is no Buddhist equivalent to the Christian method of taking an oath on the Sacred Writings. It is not an offence against Buddhism for a Buddhist to take an obligation on the VSL of another faith as Buddhism is a very tolerant religion and has the greatest respect for the VSLs of all religions. Is such an obligation taken on the VSL of another religion binding? Whether an obligation is binding or not depends entirely on the sincerity of the person making the obligation. And as you will remember, the Ancient Charges say: "(The Mason) of all men should best understand that GOD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh at the outward appearance but GOD looketh to the heart..."

The main thing that I want to emphasize is that the Volume of Sacred Law is not a specific book. As with most things Masonic, it is a symbol, a concept, an ideal, that we represent with a book. Which book? Well, that depends on you.

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