



PAPER

The Good Book

Summary: An exploration focusing upon the introduction of the Bible into Craft Lodges and suggests where the Volume of the Sacred Law might be opened when the Lodge is working.

A Brother recently asked the deceptively simple question:

'When Opening the Lodge, we are required to open our Volume of Sacred Law; but at which page?'

The immediate answer is also deceptively simple:

'In theory, any page will do.'

The Book of Constitutions merely states:

'The Bible...is always open in the Lodges' (p. x)

and

'That all Initiates shall take their Obligation on or in full view of the open Volume of the Sacred Law...' (p. xiv).

It also notes that of the Three Great Lights 'the chief (is) the Volume of Sacred Law' (p. xv).

Grand Lodge however remained silent about the specific Book or Chapter.

We can find a hint though in the Presiding Officer's Address at Installation to the new Worshipful Master, *'(only) by diligent study of above all the Volume of Sacred Law (VSL) ... which is (our) rule and guide... may you hope to discharge the duties of your office...'*

The Volume of Sacred Law then was not merely a stage prop but was intended to be central to our rituals. It would seem therefore that the Worshipful Master was free to select any passage that he considered appropriate for each meeting.

Can the old operative Masons offer the Worshipful Master guidance? Sadly not. No part of the Bible was printed in English (as distinct from Latin) until 1525 and the first complete Bible did not appear until 1535. Therefore, until they were commercially available in the late 17th century copies tended to be restricted to churches, monasteries and stately homes. Understandably there is no direct mention of the Bible in older Masonic documents until 1685. In the on-site Lodges, an oath was probably taken on the Book of Constitutions or Antient Charges. Most Masons could neither read nor write and any revered book or parchment would be deemed an adequate alternative.



Following the development of Speculative Freemasonry, the Volume of Sacred Law was formally introduced into the ritual for the first time in the 1730s. References to preferred passages in all three degrees had first appeared in France. A French 'Exposure' of 1760 suggested;

First Degree: 2 Peter;

Second Degree: Judges 12:3;

Third Degree: 1 Kings 7.

In England, an 18th century Yorkshire tradition also included three readings, and in Bristol the following Chapters were chosen and read in full by the Master before every Degree Ceremony:

First Degree: Ruth 2;

Second Degree: Judges 12;

Third Degree: Genesis 4'.

In the early 'English Ritual' however only one reading was used in all three Degrees: II Chronicles:2. The Lodge of Reconciliation of 1816 did not specify any particular reading. The Perfect ritual, used by many Lodges until 1969 and closely derived from the early workings of the Stability Lodge of Instruction in 1817 and the later Emulation Lodge of Improvement circa 1830, chose just one reading from II Chronicles 6.

It is thought that our rituals gain from the act of selecting one reading for each Degree. The following are suggested as relevant to the younger Mason today:

First Degree: Psalm 133,

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! ...for there the LORD commanded the blessing';

Second Degree: I Kings 7:13-22,

'And king Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow's son ... he cast two pillars of brass, ... and he set up the right pillar, and called the name thereof Jachin: and he set up the left pillar, and called the name thereof Boaz. And upon the top of the pillars was lily work: so was the work of the pillars finished.';

Third Degree: Ecclesiastes 12:7,

'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.'

The younger Brethren see the Immediate Past Master, apparently purposefully, turn over the pages between each Degree but are often given no idea of why any particular page was chosen. Might they perhaps benefit from hearing the Worshipful Master (or Chaplain) read out the short passages above?

The Worshipful Master would then be using the Volume of Sacred Law to instruct his Brethren, as the Address at Installation requires him to do? Might the topic provide food for thought at the next Lol or Lodge Committee?

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

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