

THE VOLUMES OF THE SACRED LAW

(Extracted by V.W. Bro. Lin Boon Par, Singapore from a lecture delivered before the Lodge of Research, No. 218, at Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, by Wor. Bro. F. W. Stephens, P.D.G.P. (E.C.), on 22nd May, 1970.

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 (also called Mhordeh Avests in Singapore.)

At the time of Writing (1992) 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. The Holy Book of any religion may be used as a VSL, provided that it teaches and its adherents believe in a Supreme Being. 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. 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

The 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 labor. 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 center 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. There is no official Grand Lodge ruling as how it should be placed or to the page at which it should be opened. In some lodges, however, this is specified, e.g. in Bristol, the Old Testament is opened at: 1st Degree: Ruth 2:19, 2nd Degree: Judges 12:5-6, 3rd Degree: Genesis 4:22. Other lodges specify other passages. In Western countries and many in the East, the Christian Bible is the only VSL present.

The Old Testament

As already stated, the Bible is open at the Old Testament. This is acceptable to Christians who consider it as part of the Bible. This is also acceptable to Jews. The Bible is hence used for obligating both Christians and Jews. Only in Israel where the Jewish religion is the predominant faith of the people is a separate Old Testament used. If Christians are present, then the Christian Bible is also open.

The Holy Koran

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 changes 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. It is for this reason primarily that the Worshipful Master and Immediate Past Master, who must touch it, have to wear gloves, quite apart from the fact that the antiquity of the custom of wearing gloves in lodge is equal to that of the wearing of aprons. 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 Sri Guru Granth Sahib

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 Holy Bhagvad Gita

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 present century.

The Dhammapada

This is one of the 31 books that comprise the Tripitaka, the Three Baskets that contain the essence of Buddha's teachings. It consists of 423 melodious Pali verses, set out in 26 vargas or chapters and is generally considered to be one of the most perfect ethical manuals extant. There are 2 sects of Buddhists: (1) The Hinayana Sect: Mainly in India, Thailand and Ceylon. They do not believe in a Supreme Being and hence are not eligible to be Freemasons. (2) Mahayana Sect: Mainly in China, Korea and Japan. They believe in a Supreme Being. 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."

(1) What is the Buddhist method of taking an obligation? 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.

(2) Is it an offence against Buddhism for a Buddhist to take an obligation on the VSL of another faith? No. it is not. Buddhism is a very tolerant religion and has the greatest respect for the VSLs of all religions.

(3) Then is such an obligation 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..."