

The Great Lights In The East

*From the Beehive State Trestleboard, Feb. 1996.,
by Roy L. Demming, S.W., Utah Research Lodge*

The Great Lights In The East

Many of us have had the pleasure of visiting lodges in other jurisdictions within our country, and some have even had the opportunity to visit in foreign countries and observe the differences in ritual and arrangement of the lodge room. I have not been fortunate enough to have enjoyed the latter, but have often wondered about procedures in some of these jurisdictions -- how do they obligate a candidate who is not of the Christian or Jewish faith? What is used on the Altar in place of the Bible, and how are the Great Lights arranged?

While reading thru a copy of the Year Book of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, I came across some information which helped to satisfy my curiosity and which I thought might be of general interest to summarize here.

Before proceeding farther, it may be advisable to consider briefly a few of the features of our order which might ease the appreciation of some of the Eastern customs:

- a. Belief in a Supreme Being is prerequisite to membership: and we believe that each individual has the freedom to worship according to his own beliefs.
- b. We accept that Volume of the Holy Writings which Speculative Freemasons have adopted from the Operative Lodges and on which a great deal of our ritual is dependent.
- c. A prime role of the Holy Writings is to provide an acceptable medium for taking and sealing our Obligations so that candidates will consider such Obligations to be solemn and binding upon them.

If the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible are to be taken as separate Volumes, there are no fewer than seven sets of Holy Writings in use in the Lodges of the East, in the band of countries stretching from Israel to New Zealand. These are:

1. The Bible (Old Testament) for Hebrews.
2. The Bible (Old and New Testaments) for Christians.
3. The Dhammapadra for the Mahay-ana Sect of Buddhists.
4. The Gita for Hindus.
5. The Granth Sahib for Sikhs.
6. The Koran for Muslims.

7. The Zend Avesta for Parsees and Zoroastrians.

All of these Sacred Books Allude to a Supreme Deity.

It is a universal practice, throughout this area, to have the Old Testament of the Bible open on the Altar (either open or closed -- the custom varies). It is generally considered necessary to have a separate Bible open at the New Testament since Christian Masons accept the whole volume as one Sacred Book. In Israel, however, where the Old Testament alone is the Holy Writings of the majority community, a New Testament is also open if there are Christian members present.

Lodge Singapore No. 7178 (E.C.) has all seven volumes always on the Altar, of which six are open. The Bible used contains both Testaments and is open only at the Old Testament.

The Square and Compasses are normally placed on the Bible, but when a candidate is taking an Obligation on another Book, a separate set of Square and Compasses is placed on that Book. The Koran is normally kept closed until required for an Obligation and must not be handled by the bare hands of a non-Muslim. Brethren, therefore, wear gloves as part of the Lodge regalia, and the Koran is usually covered with a white cloth.

The Grand Lodge of India has six Sacred Books upon the Altar, with five open -- again the Bible is opened at the Old Testament only. Since there are no Buddhist Masons in India, the Dhammapadra is omitted. The Square and Compasses are placed on the Holy Writings to which the MWGM owes allegiance. In installations, they are placed on the Book of the MWGM-Elect's faith.

Constituent Lodges under the Grand Lodge of India follow the same procedure. Lodges under other Grand Lodges but residing in India place the Bible on the Altar and, usually, the other Sacred Books representing the faith of their members. Some Lodges display only the Bible on the Altar, but provide other Volumes when required for an Obligation.

The Lodges of the Grand Lodge of Israel have the Old Testament always open on the Altar with the Square and Compasses thereon. If Christian and Muslim Brethren are present, the New Testament and Koran are added and one large set of Square and Compasses covers the three Volumes.

There are several variations to the usual method of taking Obligations, kneeling with the hands on the Bible, as we are accustomed. In Singapore, Muslims kneel, but have the Koran held over the head and use the words "hereby and hererunder" rather than "hereby and hereon."

In one New Zealand Lodge, the Charter is held over the head of the candidate, at the beginning of the Obligation, and the words "hereby and hereunder" are used. Brethren in Israel of the Orthodox Jewish faith take their Obligation standing, with their hands on the Old Testament and with the head bowed towards it. Since the destruction of the Temple, Jews do not kneel, except on the Day of Atonement. Jewish Brethren, also, usually have their heads covered when in Lodge, as in the case when in the Tabernacle.

The method of sealing the Obligation also varies from area to area. Christians, Jews, and some Muslims seal their Vows by kissing the Holy Writings, as we do. Other Brethren may touch the Book with the hand or forehead, or salute with the hands before the face, palms together, and bowing. There has even been an occasion when a Bhuddist candidate had a candle burning during his Obligation and considered his vow binding when, at its conclusion, he extinguished the flame.

It is most interesting to note that the many problems, which could have arisen from the meeting of Brethren of various creeds, have been anticipated and procedures have been adopted, to promote Peace and Harmony within the Lodges and the welfare of Freemasonry in general. While other Holy Writings may be introduced in various Lodges as occasion demands, the Old Testament Scriptures still perform their traditional function as a Landmark of our Order which has united men of every country, sect, and opinion, through the fundamental belief that above all things, there ever reigns Supreme but one Grand Architect of the Universe.