

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
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V.O.S.L.

W. Bro. Eric Parker, W.M, St. Andrew's Lodge No. 49, G.R.B.C.

This quotation is familiar to us all: "As a freemason, let me recommend to your most serious contemplation the V.O.S.L., charging you to consider it as be unerring standard of truth and justice, and to regulate your actions by the Divine precepts it contains. Therein you will be taught the important duties you owe to God, to your neighbour and to yourself."

Some time ago I was asked if I could explain the appropriate passages of the V.O.S.L. as opened for the different degrees. I do not remember ever hearing this matter dealt with in open lodge before, so this evening I will take this opportunity of telling you something of this intriguing subject which I have culled from reading. But, first I would like to say something about the various kinds of V.O.S.L. which are used in other countries by brethren of other faiths.

We all know that there is very little record of how masonry was worked in the old days - that is, before it became freemasonry. No useful purpose will be served to lift that veil. There are some old manuscripts extant, known as the Old Charges, but it appears that there is much confusion as to what kind of volume was used in Masonic lodges in the early 18th century. There was no approved ritual reference to the V.O.S.L. being the Bible prior to 1760. Sometimes the Bible is mentioned; but quite often the reference is to 'librum' which means book - which was offered to the candidate for his oath without specifying exactly what was meant. It might have been a book of constitution, the book of the Gospels, the Old or the New Testament separately or as a whole book. Again, in those early days there were probably very few complete Bibles available.

Then in the 18th century, later on, we do find detailed mention of the use of the Bible in masonic ceremonies, and we have specific reference to the candidate taking his obligation on the Bible.

Prior to the Papal Bulls of 1738 and 1751 there were Roman Catholics who were members of the Craft. One wonders if they took their obligation on the same Bible as was used by Protestants or Jews; or did they use their own? After the Union of the Moderns and the Antients in 1813 there is no doubt but that the Bible as we know it, was used by all Lodges i.e. in the

British Empire and North America. I know nothing about the practice obtaining in the other European Countries.

The New United Grand Lodge of England did not anticipate that members of the Empire, other than those belonging to the principal and existing religious persuasions of Christianity would need to be accommodated. It was assumed that the Holy Bible would suffice for all as the V.O.S.L.

It was not long however, before a serious problem occurred in India. Lodge Fort William, Calcutta was formed in 1732 and Lodge Star in the East No. 67 in 1740 (the latter is still functioning). From then on Freemasonry developed in India under the Moderns, the Antients (Atholl) Grand Lodges of England; also the Scottish and the Irish Grand Lodges. Very soon the question of whether or not Indians could be made freemasons became a hot issue. Our only interest this evening is the subject of the V.O.S.L.

The development of Freemasonry in India is well described in this year's "Prestonian Lecture" which was delivered to the Quatuor Coronati Lodge in London on 13th September last. It seems that, in the first half of the 19th century, there were cases of Hindus being made freemasons, who were obligated by a Hindu Priest, who was taken into the Lodge blindfold and conducted out again as soon as he had done his duty.

During this time there was much discussion and argument about the admission of Indians of various religions. In 1840 H.R.H. the Duke of Sussex, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England gave this ruling: "The initiation of Hindus . . . is a question which has occupied H.R.H.'s attention. for many years, and it has formed a part of his Mason's creed that provided a man believes in the existence of the Great Architect of the Universe and in futurity, and extends that belief likewise to a state of rewards and punishments hereafter,. such a person is fully competent to be received as a Brother. Previously, however, to swearing any man to secrecy it is necessary to ascertain what religion he professes in order to obligate him in the most formal and solemn manner possible; when once admitted into the Fraternity all questions of religion cease.'

Then we come to a circular in the 20th century issued jointly by the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland describing the Aims and Relationships of the Craft. The following reference applies to our subject , viz. "4. The Bible referred to by Freemasons as V.O.S.L. is always open in the Lodges. 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."

The next development was the use of Volumes other than the Bible. It was recognized that Freemasonry precludes no one who can assent to belief in a Supreme Being whatever his more specific religious convictions and practices may be and which seeks to be the means of Conciliating true friendship among persons that otherwise must have remained at a perpetual Distance. In other words we are bound to obligate a brother on the Holy Book which is sacred to his faith.

Here then, is a brief description of some of the V.O.S.L. used in other parts of the world. Now you may wonder how this can affect us. I will explain later.

1. The proper V.O.S.L. for practicing or devout Jews is the Torah, that collection of Hebrew writings known to us as the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Old Testament. It should be in Hebrew to be proper. A Jewish candidate usually stands during his obligation with his head covered.
2. As the Roman Catholic Church now permits its members to become Freemasons, it would be necessary to ensure that the correct edition of the Bible is provided.
3. For a Muslim candidate (Muhamedan) it is necessary to provide a Koran. This is the sacred Book of Islam, and the revelations therein are believed to have been communicated to the Prophet Muhamet as a final expression of God's will. This holy record of God's dealing with man has been so revered by Muslims from the earliest times that orthodox opinion has maintained that the Arabic text is untranslatable and therefore every believer needs to learn its meaning in the original language. It is therefore necessary to provide a Koran in Arabic as the appropriate V.O.S.L. Members of Eastern religions often admit the candidate in a formal procession, with a member carrying the Koran -or other V.O.S.L. - above his head on a cushion, where it remains while the obligation is taken. The candidate remains standing. He bends and touches the V.O.S.L. with the forehead. He does not kiss it.
4. The V.O.S.L. for a Hindu is the Bhagavad Gita. This is a dialogue between the Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. It may be regarded as "symbolizing the eternal dialogue which goes on in the recesses of every striving soul." God speaks to us as Krishna speaks to Arjuna if we tune our ears and try to listen to His voice. Here again, the Hindu does not salute the Gita with his lips.
5. The Guru Granth Sahib is the V.O.S.L. for a Sikh. It is considered that it stands comparison with the Gita and the New Testament; and certainly there is enough in this Volume to confirm that it conforms to the requirements of basic masonic

conviction. This book is written in Gurumakhi and a special copy would be required and a veil to cover it, and probably a fly whisk. (I think peacock feathers are used.)

6. The Parsees follow the teaching of Zoroaster, a collection of traditions from 4th - 6th centuries. This emphasizes the existence and power of a Supreme Being. Ahuramazda, Lord of the whole Universe. There is no translation of this work in acceptable form so special steps would be necessary to deal with a Parsee candidate, unless, in these modern times, he will accept our V.O.S.L. This sometimes happens. Parsees used to wear a curious black hat shaped like a cow's foot when attending business, but especially religious ceremonies. I do not know if this is still a practice among them.

7. The Buddhists present a problem. There are two major groupings across the world. The first are the Hinayana, but they do not profess any belief in a Supreme Being, and would not be considered '*fit and proper persons*'. The second group is called Mahayanas, and they do profess belief in a Supreme Being and are therefore acceptable. They are prepared, in most cases to take an obligation on the Holy Bible or the Dammapada, which are extracts from the teaching of the Buddha.

A devout Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, in addition to wearing a turban should remove his shoes before entering as he would on entering his own place of worship, although many now discard these ways and follow our western practices.

Now Brethren, I hope that what I have said so far, has been of interest. Much more could be said of the various religions, but this is really outside the object of this paper. There have been and still are many Brethren of these faiths, both Princes and Commoners; and over the years many have attained high masonic ranks in the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland.

You may wonder if or how this can affect us. It is more than mere academic interest. With the continuing influx of people of other races and creeds into our country, we may well receive applications from eminently suitable men, worthy in all other respects of being accepted. It is certainly happening in the United Kingdom - more now than formerly.

The new Langley Lodge No. 1814 is an example close to home. They have Mohamedan and Sikh Brethren; and have three V.O.S.L. in use: viz:- The Bible, the Koran and Guru Granth Sahib. We should therefore have some knowledge of what could be required if we receive applications from men of these faiths. Harry Carr said, "We are bound to obligate a brother on the Holy Book which is sacred to his faith." He is an undisputed authority.

Coromandel Lodge No. 11, in 1860 objected to a ruling by the Bengal Provincial Grand Lodge which stated that no one could be initiated without the Provincial Grand Master's approval. It had this to say -"It has from time immemorial been considered the undoubted privilege of every lodge to elect, pass and raise its own members. Men in similar situations of life naturally associate together, and from such intercourse become the best judges of each other's habits, dispositions, and general tenor of conduct: possessing this information who can so well as themselves form an idea whether a man is or is not worthy of being passed or raised?"

Now turning to the use of our own V.O.S.L. in Lodge, we find that there is no uniformity in Freemasonry as to the passage of scripture at which the V.O.S.L. is opened during our ceremonies.

St. Andrew's Lodge uses the same openings as is done in England. They are:-

1st Degree - Ruth 2 V.19, the last sentence of which reads, "The man's name with whom I wrought to-day is Boaz".

2nd Degree - Judges 12 V.6, "Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right. They then took him and slew him at the passage of Jordan"

3rd Degree - 1 Kings 7 V. 13 & 14 "And King Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow's son of the tribe of Naphtali and his father was a man of Tyre., a worker in brass; and he was filled with wisdom and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass. And he came to King Solomon and wrought all his work."

Victoria-Columbia Lodge No. 1, United Service Lodge No. 24, and American Lodges after 1707 open V.O.S.L. at the following passages:-

1st Degree - Psalm 133 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard;: that went down to the skirts of his garments. As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing; even life for evermore."

2nd Degree - Amos 7 V.7 & 8 "Thus he shewed me; and behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, ' Amos, what seest thou?' And I said, ' A plumbline.' Then said

the Lord,' Behold I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel; I will not again pass by them any more.'"

3rd Degree - Ecclesiastes 12 V. 1-7 -- see attached which also gives meanings -- This is recited at the perambulation in many English Lodges (usually by the Chaplain). It is very impressive. For many years I used to wonder what several of the phrases meant, until I found the explanation in 'Idioms of the Bible explained" by George N. Lamsa -- a translation of the Holy Bible from the Aramaic.

I have heard the following quotation used for the opening of the 3rd Degree:- I Corinthians 3 V. 6 "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you.?"

In some English Lodges the I.P.M. reads aloud the following when he closes V.O.S.L.:-

2 Corinthians 13 V. 11 "Finally, Brethren farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

I have thought that this should be done at closing in all Lodges.

ECCLESIASTES XII v. 1 - 7

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,
While the evil days come not,
Now the years draw nigh when thou shalt say,
I have no pleasure in them;
While the sun, or the light, or the moon,
or the stars, be not darkened
- *Before life ebbs, beauty flees, fortune fails*

Nor the clouds return after the rain;
- *Poverty returns after prosperity*

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble
- *Legs shall weaken*

And the strong men shall bow themselves,
- *Arms shall become weak*

And the grinders cease because they are few,
- *The teeth chew no more because, they are few*

Those that look out of the windows be darkened,
- *The eyes are dimmed*

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound
of grinding is low

- *The ears shall be so dulled that the sound of women
grinding at the mill is low.*

And he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,

- *The man is so old that even the sound of a bird will keep
him awake*

And all the daughters of musick shall be brought low,

- *And you will be deaf and tuneless with quavering voice*

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high

- *You will be afraid of heights and falling and fears shall
be in the way,*

And the almond tree shall flourish,

- *The hair will become white*

The grasshopper shall be a burden (or the locust shall be
multiplied)

- *Man shall see his children, grand-children and his great
grand children*

And desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home,

- *Standing at death's door*

And the mourners go about the streets

Or ever the silver cord be loosed,

- *Physical desire fades away*

Or the golden bowl be broken,

- *Life comes to an end*

Or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,

- *Virility stops and life comes to an end*

Or the wheel broken at the cistern

- *Impotent*

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was;

and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

FROM: Idioms in the Bible explained by

George N. Lamsa, Translator of the Holy Bible from the Aramaic

I cannot explain why any of these texts were chosen. I
can only tell you what I know. There are many other variations
in other places, but I think perhaps you may be interested in the
following extracts from the sacred writings of other faiths:-

Bhagavad Gita (The Celestial Song) Krishna says to Arjuna ;-"All creatures live bewildered, save some few Who, quit of sins, holy in act, informed, Freed from the 'opposites', and fixed in faith, Cleave onto meWorship me well, with hearts of love and faith, And find and hold me in the hour of death."

Guru Granth Sahib - Rag Gauri Dipki;- "Sing the song of praise of my Sovereign Lord, I am a sacrifice to that song, which brings everlasting solace Ever and ever, each day, He protects his living creatures, And the bountiful Giver looks after all. When even His gifts cannot be evaluated, who can appraise how great is He?"

Zend Avesta (14th - 6th Century B.C.)
Oh, Ahura Mazda, this I ask of Thee, speak to me truly.
How should I pray, when I wish to pray to one like you?
May one like you, O Mazda, who is friendly, teach one like me?
And will you give us supporting aids through the friendly Justice
And tell us how you may come to us with Good Disposition?"

Dhammapada (for Mahayana Buddhists)
"Even the gods envy those who are awakened and not forgetful, who are given to meditation, who are wise, and who delight in the repose of retirement from the world We live happily indeed, freed from greed among the greedy! Among men who are greedy let us dwell free from greed.' We live happily indeed, though we call nothing our own.' We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness."

The Creed of the Brahmin Priest of the Temple in Rangoon.
I deem that God exists behind the Gods. So vast is he that my poor feeble mind can never grasp Him wholly - Sahib nods? The God you own, O Sahib, is but, I find a mighty man, most good and just and wise No doubt; our Gods I deem indeed exist; They shadow forth His attributes. Surprise perhaps enfolds you, that we priests insist on this? But only so can man perceive in any measure what mankind must know. I find it not so hard you should conceive Your Christ to be incarnate God, for lo, I deem that Krishna oft hath walked the earth, And, as your Christ, again proclaimed His birth.

(by J.S.M. Ward in his Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods 1921)
