SOFTWARE & TECH

Masonic Holy Bible

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Understanding the Masonic Holy Bible: A Symbol of Faith and Light

For centuries, the **Masonic Holy Bible**has stood as one of the most revered and recognizable symbols within Freemasonry. More than just a religious text, it serves as a guiding light, a moral compass, and an essential piece of furniture within the Masonic lodge. To the uninitiated, it may appear to be a standard Bible with some added ornamentation. However, to a Freemason, this volume of the Sacred Law represents something far deeper—a foundational element of their spiritual and ethical journey. This article delves into the rich history, unique features, and profound significance of the Masonic Holy Bible, exploring why it remains a cornerstone of Masonic practice and symbolism.

While Freemasonry is not a religion, it requires its members to have a belief in a Supreme Being. The Masonic Holy Bible, often referred to as the Volume of the Sacred Law (VSL) in lodges that use the Christian scriptures, is the primary symbol of that belief. It is always open during lodge proceedings, typically at a specific passage, such as the first chapter of the Gospel of John, to remind all present that they are working in the presence of God and are bound by His divine law. The Bible is not used to promote any particular dogma but instead serves as a universal symbol of man's search for light and truth.

The Role of the Volume of the Sacred Law in Freemasonry

In every regular Masonic lodge around the world, the Volume of the Sacred Law is considered one of the three "Great Lights" of Freemasonry, alongside the Square and the Compasses. The Square reminds a Mason to regulate his conduct according to Masonic principles, and the Compasses remind him to circumscribe his desires and keep his passions within due bounds. The VSL, often the Masonic Holy Bible, is the ultimate source of that divine will which man seeks to understand.

The Bible is the rule and guide for a Mason's faith and practice. It is from this book that a Mason learns his duties to God, his neighbor, and himself. During the opening and closing of a lodge, the Bible is a central focus. It is also used during the administration of obligations, where candidates place their hands upon it as a sign of the solemnity and sacred nature of the promises they are making. This act underscores the Masonic principle that all obligations are taken in the presence of a Supreme Being.

Distinctive Features of a Masonic Holy Bible

A standard Bible becomes a **Masonic Holy Bible**through the addition of specific symbolic and explanatory content. These editions are produced to help Masons understand the allegories and moral lessons embedded within the craft. Here are some of the most common features that distinguish a Masonic Bible from a standard one:

- Masonic Symbolism and Engravings: The most obvious feature is the inclusion of intricate engravings, plates, and illustrations depicting Masonic symbols. These might include the Square and Compasses, the All-Seeing Eye, the Letter "G", the Pillars of the Porch (Jachin and Boaz), the Blazing Star, the Beehive, and the

Anchor and Ark. These images are not merely decorative; they are teaching tools that convey deep moral and philosophical concepts.

- Comprehensive Masonic Commentary: Many Masonic Holy Bibles include extensive footnotes, introductions, and sidebars that explain the Masonic interpretation of specific passages. For example, the building of King Solomon's Temple is a central allegory in Freemasonry, and a Masonic Bible will often have detailed commentary on the relevant chapters of 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.
- Historical and Explanatory Essays: A hallmark of the finest Masonic Bibles is the inclusion of historical essays on the origins of Freemasonry, the symbolic meaning of the lodge, and the progression through the three degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason. These essays provide context that helps a new Mason, as well as a seasoned one, to appreciate the depth of the craft.
- Lectures and Ritual Explanations: Some editions contain the text of the standard Masonic lectures, which explain the symbolic meaning of the working tools of each degree. The 24-inch gauge, the common gavel, the plumb, the level, and the trowel are all explained in plain language, connecting their physical use to a moral or spiritual application.
- Presentation Pages and Dedications: A Masonic Holy Bible often includes a special dedication page. It is a popular tradition for a lodge to present a newly raised Master Mason with a Masonic Bible, inscribed with his name, the date of his raising, and the name of the lodge. This makes it a cherished personal keepsake as well as a functional guide.
- Specific Binding and Covers: The bindings are often of high quality, using leather or bonded leather, and may feature embossed Masonic symbols on the front cover. The overall aesthetic is one of dignity, permanence, and reverence.

A Historical Look at the Masonic Holy Bible

The King James Version as the Standard

Historically, the most common version used for the Masonic Holy Bible in English-speaking lodges has been the King James Version (KJV). Its majestic, poetic language and its deep historical roots in the English-speaking world make it a fitting choice for the formal and solemn nature of Masonic ritual. Many prominent Masonic Bible publishers, such as the A.J. Holman Company (now part of HarperCollins Christian Publishing), have specialized in producing KJV editions with Masonic content since the 19th century.

The King James Version's language resonates with the ritualistic nature of the lodge. Phrases like "brotherly love, relief, and truth" and "faith, hope, and charity" are central to Masonic teaching and are beautifully expressed in the KJV text. This synergy between the language of the Bible and the language of the lodge has solidified the KJV's place within the tradition.

Famous Publishers and Editions

Several historic publishing houses have become synonymous with the Masonic Holy Bible. The A.J. Holman Company, founded in 1852, began producing beautifully illustrated Masonic Bibles in the late 19th century. Their "Masonic Holy Bible" from the 1890s is a highly sought-after collector's item, known for its exquisite color plates of Masonic symbols and its detailed concordance.

Other notable publishers include The John C. Winston Company, which produced the "Winston Masonic Bible," and the Oxford University Press, which has also released editions with Masonic appendices. In more recent times, publishers like Hendrickson and Schoettle Publishing have continued this tradition, creating modern Masonic Bibles that maintain the classic features while incorporating updated research and commentary.

The Gideons International, while not a publisher of strictly "Masonic" Bibles, has a strong connection to the craft. Many lodges use standard Gideons Bibles as their VSL, and some Gideons members are also Masons, highlighting the shared values of scripture distribution and moral uplift.

The Bible in the Three Degrees of Freemasonry

Masonic Holy Bible plays a specific and evolving role in each of the three foundational degrees of Freemasonry.

- The Entered Apprentice Degree: In this first degree, the candidate is introduced to the Bible as the "Great Light" and is taught that it is the rule and guide for his faith and practice. The Bible is used to administer the obligation of this degree. The candidate's attention is drawn to the Bible, the Square, and the Compasses, and he is taught that these three great lights rule and govern the lodge.
- The Fellow Craft Degree: As the Mason progresses to the second degree, he is encouraged to study the liberal arts and sciences, which are symbolically represented in the construction of King Solomon's Temple. The Bible becomes a source of wisdom and knowledge, particularly the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Mason is taught to seek "more light in Masonry" by understanding the symbolic meanings contained within the scripture.
- The Master Mason Degree: This is the highest of the three symbolic degrees, and it deals with the profound themes of life, death, and immortality. The Bible is central to this degree, offering comfort and hope. The opening of the Bible to a specific passage, often Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 or 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, underscores the Masonic belief in the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. The lessons of this degree are the most solemn, and the Bible provides the ultimate source of solace and assurance.

Symbolism and the Masonic Holy Bible

The Open Bible: A Symbol of Revelation

One of the most powerful and consistent symbols in a Masonic lodge is the open Bible. It is never closed during lodge hours. This signifies that the will of God is always available to guide the deliberations of the lodge. It represents the concept of divine revelation—that the principles of truth and morality are not hidden but are open for all to see and follow. The act of opening the Bible is symbolic of dispelling darkness and bringing light into the lodge room.

The specific page to which the Bible is opened is also symbolic. While many lodges open to the first chapter of John ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"), others may use Psalm 133 ("Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"). The choice of passage reflects the theme of the meeting or the degree being worked, but the constant presence of the open Bible reminds all Masons of their continuous duty to God and humanity.

The Square and Compasses on the Bible

In a Masonic lodge, the Square and Compasses are placed directly on the open Bible. This is not a casual placement but a deeply symbolic act. The Square, a symbol of morality and virtue, lies upon the divine word, signifying that our actions must be squared with the moral law of God. The Compasses, a symbol of spiritual boundaries and self-discipline, rest upon the Bible to remind the Mason that his passions and desires must be circumscribed by the divine will.

The juxtaposition of these three items—the Bible, the Square, and the Compasses—represents the complete system of Masonic ethics. The Bible provides the divine law, the Square provides the rule of action, and the Compasses provide the principle of restraint. Together, they form the foundation of a Mason's character. The placement of the Square and Compasses on the Masonic Holy Bible is a common visual for the craft and is featured prominently on the cover of many Masonic Bibles and regalia.

How to Choose a Masonic Holy Bible

If you are a Freemason, or if you are looking for a meaningful gift for a Mason, choosing the right Bible is a personal and important decision. Here are a few considerations to guide you:

1. Translation: Determine which translation you prefer. While the King James Version is the classic choice,

many modern Masons appreciate the readability of the New King James Version, the New International Version, or the English Standard Version. Ensure the Masonic content (commentary, essays, illustrations) is aligned with the translation you choose.

2. Content and Features: Look at the specific contents. Does it include the full text of the Bible? Does it have extensive Masonic notes, a concordance, maps, and color plates? Some editions are more focused on the ritual aspects, while others provide a broader historical and philosophical context. Decide what level of additional content you desire.

3. Binding and Durability: Because this Bible will be used in lodge meetings, potentially for years, a durable binding is essential. Genuine leather or bonded leather is preferred for longevity. A Bible that lies flat when open is also a practical feature for lodge use, particularly during readings.

4. Presentation Quality: If you are purchasing a Bible for a presentation, consider a "gift edition" with a presentation page, a commemorative box, and perhaps a ribbon marker. The aesthetic quality, including the cover art and the clarity of the print, will all contribute to the dignity of the gift.

5. Size and Portability: Some Masonic Bibles are large, folio editions designed to be placed on the lodge altar. These are impressive and symbolic but not meant for personal study. A personal "lodge Bible" should be a comfortable size to carry in a briefcase or to keep on a personal desk.

Conclusion

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