

# **“The Book of Constitutions”**

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This month, we want to talk about the Book of Constitutions, which our ritual admonishes us to read and study – although we rarely do. In fact, many Masons have no idea what the Book of Constitutions is or why it is important, so let me begin by sharing a couple of facts about it.

First, it was adopted by the Grand Lodge of Virginia over two hundred years ago, in 1791, and can be found at the front of the Virginia Methodical Digest, where it occupies some 28 pages, divided into 6 chapters with 27 sections.

Second, the formal name of the Book of Constitutions is “The Constitution of Masonry” or “AHIMAN REZON,” which is explained in Mackey's Lexicon of Freemasonry as follows:

This is the Masonic title for the Book of Constitutions and is derived from three Hebrew words ahim, brothers; manah, to prepare; and ratzon, the will of law; and signifies, therefore, literally “the law of prepared brothers.”

It contains the rules and regulations of the Order, an exposition of the duties of officers, the rights of members, detail of ceremonies to be used on various occasions, such as consecrations, installations, funerals, etc.; and, in fine, is a summary of all the fundamental principles of Masonry. To this book, reference is to be made in all cases where the by-laws of the Grand Lodge are silent or not sufficiently explicit.

So you can see, it provides the background and lays the groundwork for much of what now appears in the Methodical Digest and explains in large part why we do the things we do, in the way that we do them.

Let's look at the Book of Constitutions more closely. It identifies as the Grand Officers, the Grand Master, Deputy Grand Master, Grand Wardens, Grand Secretary and Treasurer, the Grand Deacons, Grand Pursuivant, and Grand Tiler – to which the Methodical Digest adds the Grand Chaplain, Grand Marshal, Grand Stewards, and Grand Purveyor. It speaks to the composition of, and voting in, Grand Lodge, although it should be noted that in the Constitutions, the Past Grand Officers collectively have one vote, while the Methodical Digest now specifies that the Past Grand Masters each have one vote.

It provides that Grand Lodge should meet once a year, in what is called the Grand Annual Communication, and when convened has the right, power, and authority to make local ordinances and new regulations, as well as to amend old ones, provided always, that the ancient landmarks are carefully preserved. To conduct business at the Grand Annual Communication requires a quorum, which the Book of Constitutions defined as consisting of representatives of five regular Lodges; the Methodical Digest now requires the presence of representatives from at least 30 subordinate Lodges to constitute a quorum.

The Book of Constitutions requires the annual election of Grand Officers, and it foreshadows the current District Deputy Grand Master system. It starts by noting that all of the different Lodges should as much as possible,

observe the same rules and usages, and to this end it shall be the duty of the Grand Master to appoint some of the Grand Officers, or other skillful Past Grand Officers or Past Masters, to visit all the Lodges to see that the ancient customs and usages are strictly observed. It further provides that the Brethren so appointed, shall have a dispensation signed by the Grand Master attested by the Grand Secretary, with the Seal of the Grand Lodge, explaining the nature of their business, whose duty then shall be to visit every Lodge of his district at one of their stated meetings—previously notifying the Lodge of the intended time of visiting them.

It also speaks to the granting of a dispensation for forming a new Lodge, which continues in force until the next stated Grand Communication, when it rests with the Grand Lodge to decide whether a Charter shall be issued.

Moving from Grand Lodge to the Blue Lodge, the Book of Constitutions informs us that except in an emergency, no Brother can be Master of a Lodge until he has first served in the Office of Warden; that none but Master Masons can be Wardens of a Lodge; that the Master of every Lodge shall be chosen by ballot; that each member who is current in his dues has one vote; and that great care should be taken that none be put in nomination as a consequence of favor or affection, birth or fortune, but rather in consideration of real merit and ability to fill his office for the honor and advancement of Masonry. Interestingly, it also provides that no Mason chosen for any office can refuse to serve without incurring the penalties laid down in the chapter of fines, unless he has served in the same office before.

The Book of Constitutions also provides a useful discussion as to the role of the Senior Warden, noting that he succeeds to all the duties of the Master, and fills the chair when the Master is absent. It further notes that if the Master goes abroad on business, resigns, demits, or is deposed, the Senior Warden fills his place until the next stated time of election.

It goes on to point out that although it was formerly held in such cases that the Master's authority ought to revert to the last Past Master who is present, yet it is now the settled rule that the authority devolves upon the Senior Warden, and in his absence upon the Junior Warden, even though a former Master be present. But the Wardens will generally waive this privilege in honor of any Past Master who may be present, and will call on him to take the chair, upon the presumption of his experience and skill in conducting the business of the Lodge. Nevertheless, such Past Master still derives his authority under the Senior Warden, and cannot act until he congregates the Lodge.

We sometimes complain about the reading of the minutes, but this goes back to the Book of Constitutions, which clearly states that the minutes taken in open Lodge must be duly read, amended, if necessary, and approved before the close of every meeting.

The Book of Constitutions also speaks of the Tiler. Like the Methodical Digest it provides that the Tiler shall be a Master Mason of knowledge and experience, who should be paid for his services. But it goes on to explain that a Brother is generally to be preferred for the office of Tiler to whom the

fees of the office may be necessary, on account of his particular circumstances.

The Book of Constitutions contains interesting historical tidbits. Just one example – it explains that the Masons of old times never gave any man the title of Master Mason, until he had first passed the chair.

There is, of course, much more to be discovered in the Book of Constitutions dealing with Grand Lodge and the Blue Lodge, as well as an explanation as to how it came to be written during the reign of Athelstane in the year 926. But, from a historical, philosophical, and moral perspective, perhaps the most interesting part of the Book of Constitutions is its explication of the great principles of our Fraternity, as well as the sections which deal with the conduct of individual Masons, both in and outside the Lodge.

The Book of Constitutions establishes as a foundational principle of Freemasonry an essential belief in God and a rejection of bigotry. It is quite explicit in stating that those desiring to be initiated into the mysteries, and instructed in the art of Ancient Masonry, must believe firmly in the Eternal God, and pay that worship which is due to Him as the great Architect and Governor of the Universe. In that regard, it states that “a Mason is obliged to observe the moral law and cannot tread in the irreligious paths of the unhappy libertine, or stupid atheist; nor, in any case, act against the great inward light of his own conscience.”

The Book of Constitutions is likewise clear and unambiguous in stating that the Mason “will likewise shun the gross errors of bigotry and superstition; making a due use of his own reason, according to that liberty wherewith a Mason is made free. For although in ancient times, the Christian Masons were charged to comply with the usages of the countries where they sojourned or worked, yet it is now thought only expedient that the Brethren in general should only be charged to adhere to the essentials of religion, in which all men agree, leaving each Brother to his own private judgment as to particular modes and forms. Whence it follows that all Masons are to be good men and true—men of honor and honesty, by whatever religious names or persuasions distinguished; always following that golden precept, of "doing unto all men as – upon a change of conditions – they would that all men should do unto them." It goes on to say that Masons must agree in the three great articles of *Noah*, namely: Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. In that way, it states, “Masonry becomes the centre of union among the Brethren, and the happy means of conciliating and cementing into one body those who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance; thereby strengthening the divine obligations of religion and love.”

These are strong words – applicable today – and, as Masons, we can take pride in the fact that these were principles already espoused by our Fraternity hundreds of years ago.

The Book of Constitutions also speaks to two additional constellations of values – public virtues and private virtues. Regarding the first, we are taught to be quiet and peaceful citizens in the state in which we reside,

obedient to the civil powers, so far as they infringe not the limited bounds of reason and of religion. Regarding the second, we are taught to avoid all manner of intemperance or excess, to be industrious in our profession, and, in our leisure hours, to study the arts and sciences that we may the better perform all our duties to our Creator, our country, our neighbor, and ourselves.

There is a great deal of instruction concerning the expected behavior of Masons both in and out of Lodge. The Book of Constitutions takes Lodge attendance quite seriously, expecting every Mason to attend all meetings, stated or emergent, when duly summoned, unless he could satisfy the Lodge that he was sick, lame, in confinement, upwards of three miles from the places of meeting, or detained by some extraordinary and unforeseen necessity.

It expected that each Mason, when in Lodge, would act with decorum and courtesy, and no private piques, or quarrels about nations, families, religions, or politics was to be tolerated. It expected each Mason to live upon the square, level, and plumb, thus cultivating the peace and harmony of the Lodge, without distinction of sect or political party.

It focused as well on the social aspect of the Fraternity, stating that when the Lodge is closed, the Brethren, before they depart, may enjoy themselves with innocent mirth, enlivened and exalted with their own peculiar songs; and sublime pieces of music, treating one another according to ability, but avoiding all excess and compulsion, both in eating and drinking; considering each other in the hours both of labor and festivity

as always free. Therefore, no Brother is to be hindered from going home when he pleases after Lodge hours.

It also details the conduct of Masons to each other and to others outside of the Lodge, going so far as to discuss differences and law suits.

More broadly, however, the Book of Constitutions urges us to acquire, as far as possible, the virtues of patience, meekness, self-denial, and forbearance, which give us command over ourselves and enable us to treat our own family with affection, dignity, and prudence; at the same time checking every disposition injurious to the world, and promoting that love and service which Brethren of the same Lodge or household owe to each other.

We are taught also that to afford succor to the distressed, to divide our bread with the industrious poor, and to put the misguided traveler into the way, are qualities inherent in the Craft, and suitable to its dignity. But though a Mason is never to shut his ear unkindly to the complaints of any of the human species, yet when a Brother is oppressed or suffers, he is in a more peculiar manner called to open his whole soul in love and compassion to him, and to relieve without prejudice, according to his capacity.

Above all, we are charged with the virtue of secrecy that we may not betray the honest secrets committed to us as a friend, a neighbor, or a Brother. We are further admonished that all who would be true Masons should learn

to abstain from malice and slander, evil-speaking, backbiting, unmannerly, scornful, provoking, reproachful, and ungodly language.

In sum, I suggest, we should read and study the Book of Constitutions, less for what it says about the organization and structure of our Fraternity – for that is covered more authoritatively and in greater detail in the Methodical Digest – and more for what it tells us about the those indispensable characteristics that truly make us Master Masons, which are "to walk humbly in the sight of God, to do justice, and love mercy."

To expect to excel in all of the virtues recommended in the Book of Constitutions may be hubris, but it is the essence of Freemasonry that we try!