



## *The Overy Papers*

### **Number 5 - The Roots of our Obligation Date**

#### **Fraternal Greetings Brethren**

It is accepted by many that the roots of our obligation go back to the building of King Solomon's Temple. The actual building of the temple is detailed in the First Book of Kings of Jewish Bible. It gives us the size and type of the building and how it was decorated but it is very thin on the masons who built it. It does state that the blocks of stone had to be dressed at the quarry as no tools were to be used at the temple site while it was being built. It also stated that all Gods ordinances, judgments and commandments must be followed and obeyed.

The Commandments, all ten of them, are pretty well known but his ordinances and judgments are a bit more difficult to define. I personally feel these were the first signs that the masons had to make a Masonic obligation, both commercial and moral to their trade.

Following the completion of the temple we move on into what Albert Mackey calls the Prehistoric Period when very little written information is available on the operative masons and we rely on the questionable legends of Freemasonry.

In 1717 the first Grand Lodge of Speculative Masons was formed in London. During the 1720's the Constitution and the Rituals, we all know so well, were prepared and accepted. They would have included as many parts of the original Obligation as possible and would have been prepared from the documents available at the time. Most of these were produced in the 1600's from earlier documents that were only alluded to.

Then in 1838 a poem known as the "Regius Poem" was discovered in an English Royal Collection by Mr. Halliwell-Phillips who was the first to realized it was an early Masonic Charter

In fact, it is officially titled "Here begin the constitutions of the art of Geometry according to Euclid" and is described as "A poem of Moral Duties".

It is written as a 795 line poem but please relax, I do not intend to read them all tonight.

It states early on that masons had:

"To keep their statutes every one. That were ordained by King Athelstone"

Now King Athelstone is considered to be the first King of all England and reigned as such between 924 and 939. He also started the concept of modern government and compiled many of the early charters.

It has been estimated that the "Regius Poem" was transcribed in about 1390, so it means it was copied from a document at least 450 years earlier from about 940 AD.

The complete document provides an insight into what our Fraternity was based on and covers some parts of our Obligation as well as some of the rituals we know today.

It is separated into sections and starts with an introduction into Masonry describing its history and benefits. An interesting fact is, it also mentions that the clerks who wrote the text had changed the name of geometry to the name of masonry,

It also mentions the building of the Tower of Babel and not the Temple of Solomon.

I feel that this omission was deliberate as the translation of the Bible into English was declared a heresy and as such the penalty was being burnt at the stake. So I feel a less known building was used. When the 17th Century copies were made, England was Protestant and King Solomon's Temple was inserted and the tower of Babel removed.

It consists of a number of sections and one, called the "15 Articles" gives the rules of employment of operative masons while the section that follows is called the "15 Points of plural constitutions" that is the Moral Rules of Masonry and the one I find the closest to our Obligation today.

It also instructs that everyone to come to a National meeting at least every three years but preferably once a year to discuss and solve any transgressions and problems. Travelling of course took some time back then. The meeting would be held and what is said at the meeting must not be repeated outside. Also it was held with everyone being of equal standing.

To Quote:

**"Also at every assembly that you hold,  
That you come to your liege king bold,  
Beseeching him of his high grace,  
To stand with you in every place,"**

Next is the "The art of the four crowned ones" that explains the 7 Sciences of - Grammar - Dialect - Rhetoric - Music - Astronomy - Arithmetic and Geometry. (Does that Sound Familiar?)

Ok, so it is not exactly the same as our obligation or ritual but the framework is there and there are many similarities. Remember it was written 750 years before the first Grand Lodge.

I found it fascinating to discover how much was a part of our Obligation and our Rituals and to realize that our Masonic values were about during the early days of written history.

Some things have been omitted and not included as a part of our Obligation of today because of cultural changes. For example **"you must not lay with the Masters concubines"**. But then I did not know he had any.

The penalties for transgression were I felt not quite so severe;

*I quote*

**The sheriff shall come them soon,  
And put their bodies in deep prison,  
For the trespass that they have done,  
And take their goods and their cattle  
Into the king's hand, every delle, (part)  
And let them dwell there full still,  
Till it be our liege king's will.**

I also found it an unusual document because it was written in English. It had to be of course, the masons would not have understood either Latin or Norman French only the working class English. In fact the England of the day had three official Languages.

It is set out as a poem, which is an Anglo Saxon concept that made it easy to remember. Most masons would not be able to read and they needed to be able to learn and recite the document and of course the ability to pass it on to others was essential.

If any of you have read the story of Boewulf it is written in the same way but then it was an Anglo Saxons story from the same period.

And to finish and to satisfy all Religious faiths the document ends with two responses

**"Amen! Amen! So mote it be!**

The first is Latin "So be it" and second is Anglo Saxon English "So may it be" which basically means the same thing but as masons have said "So mote it be" since at least 1399. We keep up the tradition.

So Gentlemen if you want to read the full transcript of the Regius Poem it is available on our Grand Lodge website.

Thank you for listening and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

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