

AHIMAN REZON

These strange words were first used Masonically by Laurence Dermott (1720-1721) as a title of the Book of Constitutions, printed in 1756, used by the Ancient Grand Lodge in London.

The Title Page of this Ancient Tome is as follows:

AHIMAN REZON or, A Help To A Brother

Showing the excellency of secrecy, the principles of the craft And the Benefits arising from a strict Observance thereof.

What sort of Men ought to be initiated into the Mystery, and what sort of Masons are fit to govern lo with their Brethren in and out of the Lodge. Likewise the prayers unfed in the Jewish and Christian Lodges, the Ancient Manner of Constituting new Lodges, with all the Charges, Etc.

Also the old and new Regulations. The Manner of Chufing and Installing Grand-Master and Officers, and other useful Particulars too numerous here to mention. To which is added, The Greatest Collection of Masons Songs ever presented to public view, with many entertaining Prologues and Epilogues.

Together with, Solomon's Temple and Oratorio as it was performed for the benefit of Freemasons by Brother Laurence Dermott, Sec.

According to "The Builders," at one time or another, eight American Grand Jurisdictions have used the words as a title to their Books of Law; Georgia, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Two still retain the old title; Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Georgia now has "Masonic Manual and Code;" Maryland, "Constitutions, By-Laws and Standing Orders;" New York, "Book of Constitutions;" North Carolina, "Code," also named "Constitution and Regulations;" Tennessee, "Masonic Code;" and Virginia, the "Text Book," commonly referred to as the "Methodical Digest." Pennsylvania's Ahiman Rezon contains the following:

SECTION XII - HISTORICAL NOTES - AHIMAN REZON.

The first Masonic book published in America was printed in Philadelphia by Brother Benjamin Franklin in 1734. It was a reprint of what is known as "Anderson's Constitutions," which was published in 1723 under the authority of the Grand Lodge of England, and entitled: "The Constitutions of the Freemasons. Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c., of the Most ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity. For the use of the Lodges," and was compiled by

Brother James Anderson, D.D. This reprint is now very scarce. A copy of it is in the Library of the Grand Lodge.

The “Ahiman Rezon; A Help to a Brother,” was prepared in 1756 by Brother James Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of England According To The Old Institutions,” once called the “Ancients.”

This corresponded to the Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of England, once called the “Moderns.”

The first Book of Masonic law published by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania was entitled: “Ahiman Rezon abridged and digested” as a help to all that are or would be Free and Accepted Masons.” It was prepared by the Grand Secretary, Rev. Brother William Smith, D.D., Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and was almost entirely a reprint of Dermott’s work; it was approved by the Grand Lodge November 22, 1781, published in 1783, and dedicated to Brother George Washington.

It is reprinted in the introduction to the first or edited reprint of the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, 1730-1808. (See the Library, p 201.)

On April 18, 1825, a revision of the Ahiman Rezon was adopted, being taken largely from “Anderson’s Constitutions.” Another revision was adopted June 15, 1857, which was followed by the revisions adopted June 15, 1867, December 5, 1877, December 6, 1893, December 4, 1895 and December 1, 1915. The revision of 1825 contains the following as the definition of the words Ahiman Rezon:

“The Book of Constitutions is usually denominated Ahiman Rezon. The literal translation of “Ahman” is a “Prepared Brother,” from “Manah” to “Prepare,” and “Rezon,” “Secret;” so that “Ahiman Rezon” literally means, the secrets of a Prepared Brother. It is likewise supposed to be a corruption of “Achi man Ratzon,” the thoughts and opinions of a true and faithful Brother.”

As the Ahiman Rezon is not a secret. but a published book, and the above definition has been omitted from subsequent revisions of the book, the words were submitted to Hebrew scholars for translation upon the assumption that they are of Hebrew origin. The words, however, are not Hebrew.

Subsequent inquiry leads to the belief that they come from the Spanish, and are thus interpreted: “Ahi” (which is pronounced “Ahee”), is demonstrative and means “there,” as if pointing to a thing or place; “Man” may be considered a form of “Monta,” which means the “Account, amount, sum total,” or “Fullness;” while “Razon” (or Rezon) means “Reason, Principle,” or “Justice,” the word justice being used in the sense of law. If, therefore, we ascribe the words “Ahiman Rezon” to Spanish origin, their meaning is - “There is the full account of the law.”

South Carolina’s Ahiman Rezon, under “Masonic Definitions,” states: “The Book of Constitution of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina is also called the Ahiman Rezon. The title is derived from three Hebrew words, “ahim,” brothers; “manah,” to appoint or select; and “ratzon,”

the will or law; and it consequently literally signifies “the law of appointed or selected brothers.” It contains the rules and regulations of the Order, the details of all public ceremonies to be used on various occasions, such as consecrations, installations, funerals, etc., and is, in fact, a summary of all the fundamental principles of Freemasonry. To this book reference is made in all cases where the by-laws of the Grand Lodge are silent or not sufficiently explicit. In all public processions, the Ahiman Rezon, or Book of Constitutions, should be carried before the Grand Master by the Master of the oldest Lodge present.

Considerable controversy has taken place over the meaning of the words, and many and ingenious have been the explanations offered by various students.

Mackey, who erred so seldom that his monumental Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, albeit enlarged and revised, is still a foundation stone for most structures of Masonic lore; interpreted them to mean “the will of selected brethren.” Dr. Fredrick Dalcho, learned Masonic authority of early years, believed that a better translation of the Hebrew was “the secrets of a prepared brother.”

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the structure of Hebrew, it may be stated that many words in that ancient tongue are susceptible of many interpretations; indeed, many words in English have different meanings, according to context. “Case,” for instance, may be an action-at-law, a container, and illness or an injury.

Other words pronounced alike but spelled differently have divergent meanings, as t-w-o, and t-o-o, or i-n and i-n-n. Written Hebrew is often without vowels (instance JHVH, usually written Jehovah in English) so the difference in translation of these two able Masonic scholars is not particularly strange.

Later authorities, however, believe that both were mistaken and that the real meaning of Ahiman Rezon is “faithful brother Secretary,” for technical reasons which have been well set forth by noted Hebrew scholars, including Brother the Reverend Morris Rosenbaum, a quarter of a century ago, in the Transactions of Quatuor Coronati (the great research Lodge in London).

According to the theory of the more modern translation, Dermott chose the word “Ahiman” because, as a Hebrew proper name, it was translated in the Geneva or “Breeches” Bible as “a brother of the right hand.” It is interesting to note that Young’s Concordance of the Bible (1924 revision) translates Ahiman, which occurs four times in the King James version, as meaning “brother of man.” Numbers, Joshua and Judges refer to Ahiman, a son of Anak, who dwelt in Hebron, and First Chronicles to Ahiman, a Hebrew porter in the Temple.

Dermott, however, must have used the Geneva Bible; all the texts in his book, quoted in his address “To the reader,” are verbatim excerpts from this work. In that “Breeches” Bible is the familiar “Table of Names and their Interpretations familiar in many editions of the Scriptures. Here Dermott must have found this “brother of the right hand” which he evidently took to indicate brother of fidelity, a faithful brother. However incorrect this translation may be - apparently it comes from the Hebrew “ah,” brother, and “yamin,” right hand - it was the

translation to which Dermott had access. In the same Bible “Rezon” is translated “a secretarie or leane.”

In the dedication of his second edition of the Ahiman Rezon, Dermott wrote: I hope you will do me the honor of calling me a faithful brother.”

Dermott had a smattering of Hebrew, but he fell into the common error of those whose knowledge runs not very deep; he lacked perspective and any feeling for the relativity of facts about the difficult tongue. Moderns find the same attitude of mind among the unschooled; an ignorant man denies that the earth is a ball, because it “looks” flat, but has no difficulty in believing in ghosts and banshees; he can “understand” how “speech travels through a telephone wire” but cannot comprehend the verity of the geological doctrine that the earth is many, many times six thousand years old. Similarly, Dermott could go to a Bible for his Hebrew words and their meanings, and not comprehend that a Hebrew scholar might make a mistake.

It is curious to find the pseudo-science of numerology called upon to explain Dermott’s choice of a name for his Book of Constitutions, which was, so oddly, to persist long after its contents was superseded by more modern text. Yet the evidence is plain; one need not credit that belief which ascribes magical powers of prophecy to the numerical value of the letters in a name to see the point.

An ancient Jewish writer chose as a title of his work, words the numerical value of the letters of which would equal or nearly approximate the numerical value of the letters of his name, thus cryptographically offering evidence that he did, indeed, have the right to claim its authorship . . . a custom at least as old as 1200 A.D.

In all probability Dermott knew this; without such knowledge, it is difficult on any theories of probability to account for the fact that the numerical value of the letters in Ahiman Rezon is 372, while those in Laurence total 371. The difference of one is not actually a discrepancy, because Gematria, or numerical cryptography, regards a difference of but one as an equality, and even gives such a factor a name.

It may well be that this old Jewish custom was set forth for Dermott by a Jew, who would naturally demonstrate it only with a given name, not a surname; this may be why Dermott chose words which cryptographically equal “Laurence” and not “Laurence Dermott.”

Whatever the real meaning of Ahiman Rezon - whether it be Hebrew, properly translated “faithful brother secretary,” or “the will of selected brethren,” or “the secrets of a prepared brother,” or Spanish in origin, properly understood “There is a full account of the law” as Pennsylvania sets forth - the name for many years caught the imagination of Masons. Only lately has it fallen from its former high estate. Two old and greatly respected American Jurisdictions still find it all sufficient as the title of their official books of the law. It is to be noted, however, that but little of Laurence Dermott remains in either Pennsylvania’s or South Carolina’s volume; only the name there persists as a reminder of the Antient: influence in both these Grand Lodges.