

The Relationship between Astronomy and Freemasonry

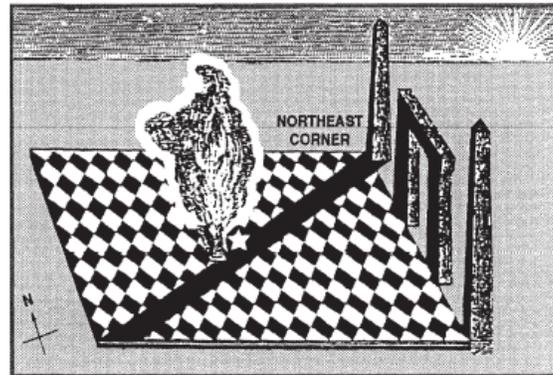
Article by Rob Lund

There are some Lodge buildings that have a Zodiac painted on their ceilings. When asked why this is so, and what it represents, many, or most, Masons are at a loss to explain it. This article attempts to shed some light on the subject.

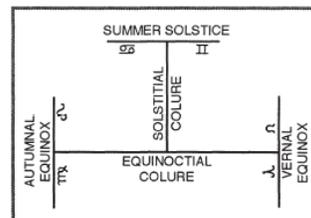
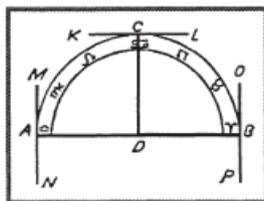
In the previous edition of this newsletter, I review the book "*The Secrets of Solomon's Temple*". The author, Kevin L Gest, shows that the Temple may have incorporated into its design an astronomical calendar which marked the solstices and equinoxes, allowing the people to know important times of the year, such as when to plant seeds for their crops. The two pillars were placed in such a way as to show the solstices, and the equinoxes were marked by light in the Sanctum Sanctorum.

There are various references in our ritual to the sun (rising in the East and setting in the West) and the moon, and the seven stars (which may be a reference to the seven planets, although some say it points to the Pleiades). The circumambulation shows the direction of the apparent movement of the sun, with the JW representing the sun's meridian, when it was time to call everyone from labour to refreshment. The absence of an officer in the North indicates the lack of light coming from that direction. Another part of the ritual says that the sun is the centre of our system and the Earth revolves on its axis. Jacobs Ladder, the three principle steps, the winding staircase, the Triple Tau, the Royal Arch, the keystone, the three pillars of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, the point within a circle, the signs in the three degrees, the sprig of Acacia, all have astronomical connections. Space does not allow for an explanation of these here.

THE RISING
SUN OF THE
SUMMER
SOLSTICE



The basic knowledge, mentioned above, was incorporated into many of the ancient mysteries and religions, and their rituals. It was also incorporated into many of the myths of old in allegorical form. What follows is a synthesis of these allegories. Master Masons will recognize the parallels with the legend of Hiram Abif.



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ASTRONOMICAL ALLEGORY OF THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE SUN

According to all the ancient astronomical legends, the sun is said to be slain by the three autumnal months—September, October, and November, each assaulting him in succession, in his passage around the zodiac toward the winter solstice, or "southern gate of the zodiac", that point the sun has reached his lowest southern declination. The summer sun, glowing with light and heat as he reaches the autumnal equinox, enters *Libra* on the 21st of September. All through that month, and until the 21st of October, he declines in light and heat, but emerges from *Libra* without any serious harm from the attack of September. The assault of October is far more serious; and the sun, when he *leaves* the venomous sign of the *Scorpion*, on the 21st of November, is deprived of the greater part of his power and shorn of more than half his glory. He continues his way toward the southern tropic, and in November encounters the deadly dart of *Sagittarius*, which proves fatal; for when the sun *leaves* the *third* autumnal sign, on the 23rd of December, he lies dead at the winter solstice. That is the shortest day of the year. The sun now seems to be quite overcome by "the sharpness of the winter of death." Amid the universal mortality that reigns in the vegetable kingdom, the sun, deprived of light, heat, and power, appears dead also.

As the sun continues his course in the zodiac, he appears to be carried west by the wintry signs. This seems to be done at night, because the sun then being invisible, his change of position is only discovered by the stars which precede his rise at daybreak.

The body is seemingly buried beneath the withered fruits and flowers—the dead vegetation of summer—in the midst of which, however, yet blooms the hardy *evergreen*, emblematic of the vernal equinox, giving a sure token that the sun will yet arise from the cold embrace of winter and regain all his former power and glory.

The following is a poetical version of the foregoing portion of the solar allegory:

Part I — The Death of the Sun.

WHEN down the zodiacal arch ☾
The summer sun resumes his march,
Descending from the summit high
With eager step he hastens by
The "lordly lion" of July ♌
And clasps the virgin in his arms.
Through all the golden August days
The sun the ardent lover plays,
A captive to her dazzling charms. ♀
But when the harvest time is o'er,
When the gathered grapes perfume the air
And ruddy wine begins to pour,
The god resumes his way once more;
And, weeping in her wild despair,
He leaves the royal virgin there.

What cares he now for Virgo's woes,
As down the starry path he goes
With scornful step, until, at last,
The equinoctial gate is passed?
Two misty columns black with storms,
While overhead there hangs between
A lurid thunder cloud, which forms
The frowning archway of the gate—
The gloomy equinoctial gate, ♎
An evil place for travelers late,
Where envious *Libra* lurks unseen;
And near the portal lies in wait
September, filled with deadly hate.
With stately step the god draws nigh,
Yet, such is his majestic mien,

That whether he shall strike or fly,
 The trembling ruffian hardly knows,
 As Phoebus through the gateway goes.
 But, as the shining form came near,
 The wretch's hate subdued his fear,
 And, nerving up his arm at length,
 He aimed a blow with all his strength
 Full at the god as he went by.
 In anger Phoebus turned his head—
 Away the trembling coward fled.
 The god, though smarting with the blow,
 Disdains to follow up his foe;
 And down the zodiacal path
 Pursues his gloomy way in wrath.
 Still blacker turn the autumn skies,
 And red *Antares*, evil star,
 Points out the place, more fatal far,
 Where fell *October* ambushed lies.
 The SUN, as if he scorned his foes,
 In pride and glory onward goes. ♁
 Not he from deadly *Scorpio* flies,
 Nor pauses he, nor backward turns,

 Though redder yet *Antares* burns,
 And darker yet his pathway grows.
 Meanwhile *October*, from his lair,
 On Phoebus rushes unaware,
 His murderous purpose now confessed,
 And smites the sun-god in the breast.
 A ghastly wound the villain makes—
 With horrid joy his weapon shakes;
 And, as he sees the god depart,
 His hand upon his bosom pressed,
 Believes the blow has reached the heart.
 Along his way the sun-god goes,
 Unmindful where the path may lead,
 While from his breast the life-blood flows.
 The clouds around him gather now,
 The crown of light fades from his brow.

And soon, advancing 'mid the night,
 The *Archer* on his pallid steed, ♄
 With bended bow, appears in sight.
November, bolder than the rest,
 Hides not behind the gloomy west;
 But, striding right across the path,
 Defies the god and scorns his wrath;
 And, raising high his frowning crest,
 These haughty words to him addressed:
 "*September* and *October*, both,
 You have escaped and still survive;
 But I have sworn a deadly oath,
 By me you cannot pass alive.
 That which I promise I perform.
 For I am he who, 'mid the storm,
 Rides on the pallid horse of death."
 While even thus the spectre spoke,
 He drew his arrow to the head—
 The god received the fatal stroke,
 And at the *Archer's* feet fell dead.
 Soon as the sun's expiring breath
 Had vanished in the ether dim,
December came and looked on him; ♄
 And looking, not a word he saith,
 But o'er the dead doth gently throw
 A spangled winding sheet of snow.
 And when the winding sheet was placed,
 Comes evil *Janus*, double-faced, ♃
 A monster like those seen in sleep.
 An old "*seafaring man*" is he,
 As many others understand,
 Who carries water from the deep
 And pours it out upon the land.
 Now *February* next appears,
 With frozen locks and icy tears,
 A specter cruel, cold, and dumb,
 From polar regions newly come.
 These *three* by turns the body bear
 At night along the west, to where
 A flickering gleam above the snows

A dim electric radiance throws,
A nebular magnetic light,
Which, flashing upward through the night,
Reveals the *vernal equinox*,
And him whose potent spell unlocks
The gates of spring. An evergreen
Close by this spot is blooming seen.
'Tis there they halt amid the snow—
Unlawful 'tis to go farther go—
And, having left their burden there,
They vanish in the midnight air.
Yet on this very night next year

Will this same *evil three* appear,
And bring along amid the gloom
Another body for the tomb.
But still the *evergreen* shall wave¹
Above the dark and dismal grave,
For ever there a token sure
That, long as Nature shall endure,
Despite of all the wicked powers
That rule the wintry midnight hours,
The sun shall from the grave arise,
And tread again the summer skies.

Master Masons will perceive the parallels with the legend of Hiram Abif.

Notes:

¹ The acacia.

THE RAISING OF OSIRIS, AN ALLEGORY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE SUN

The sun was released from the grave of winter, and finally restored to life and power by the vernal signs *Taurus* and *Gemini*, and the first summer one, *Cancer*, aided by the second one, *Leo*; or, in other words, by April, May, and June, aided by July.

When the sun arrives at the *vernal equinox*, he first gives unequivocal tokens of a return to life and power. In April he enters *Taurus*, and in May *Gemini*. During these two months he greatly revives in light and heat, and the days rapidly lengthen. The sun, however, does not attain the summit of the zodiacal arch until the *summer solstice*, in June, when he enters *Cancer*, the first summer sign and the *third* from the vernal equinox. Nor does he regain all of his energy and power until he enters *Leo* in July. On the 21st of June, when the sun arrives at the summer solstice, the constellation *Leo*—being but 30° in advance of the sun—appears to be leading the way and to aid by his powerful paw in lifting the sun up to the summit of the zodiacal arch. April and May are therefore said to fail in their attempt to raise the sun; June alone succeeds by the aid of *Leo*. When, at a more remote period, the summer solstice was *in Leo*, and the sun actually entered the stars of that constellation was more intimate, and the allegory still more perfect.

This *visible* connection between the constellation *Leo* and the return of the sun to his place of power and glory, at the summit of the Royal Arch of heaven, was the principal reason why that constellation was held in such high esteem and reverence by the ancients. The astrologers distinguished *Leo* as the "sole house of the sun," and taught that the world was created when the sun was in that sign.

The following is a poetic version of the second part of the solar allegory:

Part II — The Resurrection of the Sun

IN silence with averted head
by night the "*evil three*" have fled.
And cold and stiff the body lies
Beneath the gloomy winter skies.

Yet, had you been a watcher there.
That dismal night beside the dead.
Had you that night been kneeling there,
Beside the dead in tears and prayer.

You might have seen, amid the air,
A flickering, dim, auroral light,
Which hovered on the midnight air,
And, seeing in the gloomy sky
This mystic strange, celestial light
Contending with the powers of night.
You might have taken hope thereby.
There was, alas! no watcher there
To mark this radiance in the air.
To gaze with earnest, tearful eye
Upon this radiance in the sky.
There was no watcher there, alas!
To ask in anxious whispers low,
"Will not this light still brighter grow,
Or will it from the heavens pass
And leave me plunged in deeper gloom
Beside this cold and lonely tomb?"
Meanwhile the light increased—although
Beside the grave no mourner stood
Amid the lonesome solitude—
And as with tints of blue and gold,
And flashes of prismatic flame,
It lighted up the midnight cold,
Along the plain in beauty came
A shining and majestic form,
And as it came the winter's storm,
As if abashed, its fury checked.
No more above and round the path,
Beneath the wind's tempestuous wrath,
The snowy billows heave and toss;
A sacred calm as he draws nigh
Pervades at once the earth and sky.
His robe was blue, its borders decked
With evergreen and scarlet moss;
His hands upon each other rest,
Due north and south, due east and west;
The open palms together pressed
As if engaged in silent prayer.
He thus had formed with pious care
The holy symbol of the cross.

A lamb doth close beside him go,
Whose whiter fleece rebukes the snow¹:
These things sufficiently proclaim
His mystic office and his name.
Beside the grave he comes and stands,
Still praying there with folded hands;
And, while he prays, see drawing near
Another shining form appear,
His right hand on his bosom pressed,
As if by bitter grief distressed,
The other pointing to the skies²,
And, as he weeps, each radiant tear,
That from his sad and earnest eyes
Falls on the earth, is transformed there
To violets blue and blossoms fair,
That sweetly perfume all the air.
A third one now appears in sight,
Arrayed in royal robes of light,
A "lordly lion" walks in pride.
More glorious far; and at his side
And he who came in glory last
Between the others gently passed,
And, looking down upon the dead,
With level, open palms outspread³,
A holy benediction said.
This done, the *first one, by command*⁴,
The dead god taketh by the hand:
At once through all the body flies
The same warm flush that marks the skies.
The shrunken features, cold and white,
A moment shine with life and light.
A moment only—'tis in vain:
Unconquered Death resumes his reign.
So doth a solitary wave
Leap up amid the lonely night,
And catch a gleam of life and light,
And then sink helpless in its grave.
To raise the god the first thus failed⁵—
The powers of darkness yet prevailed;
So to the *second* he gives place,

Who, like the first one, by command⁶,
 The sun-god taketh by the hand,
 And, looking downward in his face
 With pleading voice and earnest eyes,
 On Phoebus calls and bids him rise.
 Though at his touch the blood unbound.
 With rapid current red and warm
 Runs swiftly through the prostrate form,
 Yet silent on the frozen ground
 The god lies in a trance profound,
 Devoid of motion, deaf to sound⁷.
 Alas! alas! what doth remain?
 Shall death and darkness ever reign,
 And night eternal hide the day?

Then said the *third one*, "Let us pray."⁸
 And full of faith and strong intent,
 His prayer to IH. VAH. upward went.
 "Amen" was said—"so mote it be!"
 And then the last one of the three
 Arose and stretching forth his hand,
 Calls on the dead, and *gives command*
 In IH VAH.'S name to rise and stand.
 Then up rose Phoebus in his pride,
 With the "lordly lion" by his side,
 And earth and sky with his glory shone
 As again he sat on his golden throne.
 For the voice of God is nature's law,
 And strong was the grip of the lion's paw⁹.

Again, Master Masons will see the parallel with the legend of Hiram Abif.

THE LION'S
 PAW ---
 ANCIENT
 EGYPTIAN
 DRAWING



Notes:

- ¹ The Apprentice apron.
- ² Fellowcrafts will recognize this.
- ³ Master Masons should think of the Obligation.
- ⁴ The JW trying the EA grip.
- ⁵ It proves a slip!
- ⁶ The SW trying the FC grip.
- ⁷ It proves a slip!
- ⁸ Master masons will recognise: OLMGITNHFTWS
- ⁹ The Master Masons will recognise this.

What does this mean to us as Masons?

"As long as this allegory is remembered, the leading truths of astronomy will be perpetuated, and the sublime doctrine of the immortal nature of man, and other great moral lessons they are thus made to teach, will be illustrated and preserved."