

The Symbol of the Seven Stars

ASCENDING THE MASONIC LADDER

NATHAN ST. PIERRE ELUCIDATES A RARELY-DISCUSSED CRAFT SYMBOL

According to Craft symbolism, the Theological Ladder connects the floor of the Lodge (representing the world) with the ceiling of the Lodge (representing the star-decked heaven).¹ When we contemplate climbing that Ladder, the next objects that attract our attention are great celestial luminaries adorning the tracing board. We observe the sun and the moon. The moon is curiously surrounded by seven stars. Masonic tradition informs us that all these luminaries are connected because the sun, moon and stars obey the will of the Supreme Architect, under whose watchful care even comets perform their stupendous revolutions. We know that the sun rules the illumination of the day, the moon governs the actions of the night, but what do these stars represent?

It seems natural to see the tracing board stars as actual stars in the night sky. This has been the belief of several Masonic authors. According to Albert G. Mackey, the seven stars represented the Pleiades.² Indeed, for centuries, the phrase “the seven stars” has been a recognizable allusion in the English language to the Pleiades. For example, in 1611 it was used by the translators of the King

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James Bible to render the Hebrew word כִּימָה, which denotes the Pleiades.³

Seeke him that maketh the seven starres and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day darke with night: that calleth for the waters of the Sea, and powreth them out upon the face of the earth: the LORD is his Name.⁴

It has also been suggested that the stars represent the seven Classical Planets. Bro. Charles Clyde Hunt, FPS, explains, “The seven stars are the seven planets of the ancient world: the moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.”⁵

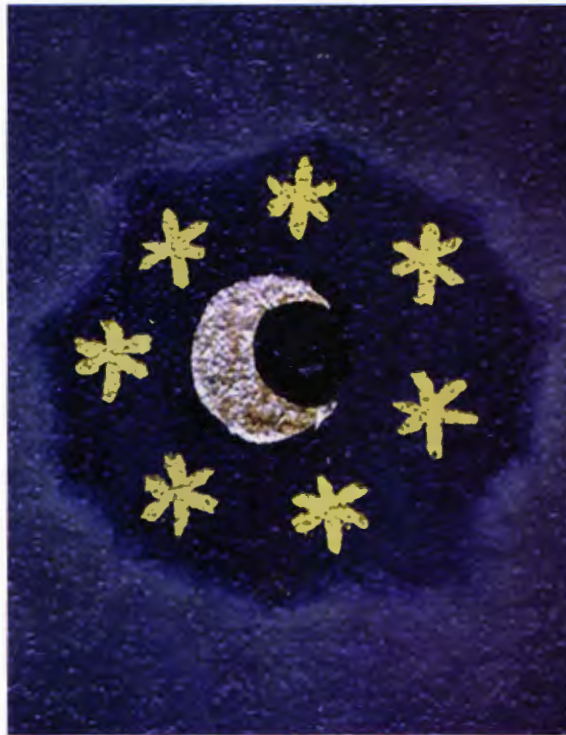
The implications of the actual celestial representation of this Masonic instance may warrant further investigation, but are beyond the focus of this examination. Instead, we will look at what the stars might mean in traditional terms. To do this we will turn to mythology. There are many myths that could illustrate this idea, but one with particular interest is that of Orpheus because of the importance he had on the Greek religion. He was the son of Apollo, the god of light, and Calliope, the muse of epic poetry and music. He received a lyre from Hermes and quickly mastered the instrument to the point where he could charm the beasts of the field and even make the rocks and flowers dance. He married his love, Eurydice, and while she was

avoiding the lustful advances of Aristaeus she was bitten by a serpent and died. Overwhelmed with grief, Orpheus took his lyre and descended into the underworld to plead with Hades. His song was so powerful that the Shades wept, the Furies cried and Persephone and Hades were moved to grant him his request—on the condition that his trust would be so perfect that he would return to the world of the living without looking back to see if Eurydice was walking behind him. However, in a moment of weakness, Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice was lost to him for a second time.

For seven months he sat in mourning. He slowly gained back the virtues that he had lost. He renounced common religious practice of the day and refused to participate in Bacchanalian rites. This offended a group of Thracian women who murdered him by tearing him apart. This was symbolic because it was what had been done to Bacchus, the god whose rites Orpheus scorned. Upon his death, Orpheus' body was buried by the Muses, his head continuing to sing, and his lyre was forever immortalized in the heavens as the constellation Lyra.

The Greek mysteries had strong mystical elements inspired by Orpheus and his legend. These initiations did not celebrate the suffering of the mythical hero, but the journey into the underworld and the loss and later recovery of his ideals. Initiates were often buried with gold plates with inscriptions alluding to a celestial destiny:

*Γῆς παῖς εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,
αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ γένος οὐράνιον*
I am a child of earth and of starry heaven,
but my race is of heaven (alone).⁶



The placement of the Lyre among the constellations reinforces the lesson taught by the Orphic mysteries: that to be placed among the celestial bodies as a stellar object was an *apotheosis*, a divine

end goal. For thousands of years, humans have had an intimate connection to the night sky. There is not a civilization that has not created some kind of mythology for the constellations. The unspoken question of those people being that if these great mythological heroes and beings could become immortalized in the heavens, then could such a fate be gained by anyone? Bro.: Manly P. Hall tells us:

The pagans looked upon the stars as living things, capable of influencing the destinies of individuals, nations, and races. That the early Jewish patriarchs believed that the celestial bodies participated in the affairs of men is evident to any student of Biblical literature, as, for example, in the Book of Judges 5:20: "They fought from heaven, even the stars in their courses fought against Sisera."⁷

The connection between humanity and the stars could be more tangible still. Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century physician, theorized that "The

body comes from the elements, the soul from the stars, and the spirit from God. All that the intellect can conceive of comes from the stars.”⁸

Perhaps this notion is more ancient than we think. Initiates into the Mythraic mysteries were clothed in a cape that was embroidered or painted with stars to signify the soul in its highest form. A symbolic heavenly nature was conferred by initiation into the mysteries, and men who formerly dwelt about the earth itself were raised to a heavenly abode and their whole natures were invested with celestial raiment. The corporeal body was transmuted by the ancient mysteries into a celestial body, as those who had previously enveloped themselves in the dark garments of form now put on a more luminous garb resplendent with the heavenly lights

The association of those involved in initiation with celestial bodies is also a theme in Freemasonry. The Master and his Wardens represent the stations of the sun (sunrise, noon, and sunset), while the Senior Deacon carries a solar rod and the Junior Deacon bears a lunar one.

This idea that we have a divine, or celestial nature, and that we are trying to return home is signified in the Masonic lectures where the covering of the Lodge is described as being that star-decked heaven “where all good Masons hope to arrive.” As Goethe wrote:

And solemn before us
Veiled the dark portal,
Goal of all mortal;
Stars silent rest o’er us
Graves under us silent.⁹

This concept will briefly present itself two more times in the Master Mason degree, but, for propriety, those references are beyond this

examination. However, if the symbol is important enough to be included on the tracing board, the early rituals must speak to it in some way. The lectures of English Masonry generally contain beautiful language to this effect. For example:

... the Mason who is in possession of [charity] in its most ample sense, may justly be deemed to have arrived at the summit of Masonry; figuratively speaking, an ethereal mansion, veiled from mortal eyes by the starry firmament, emblematically depicted in our Lodges by seven Stars, which have an allusion to as many regularly made Masons, without which number no Lodge is perfect, nor can any candidate be legally initiated therein.¹⁰

This strongly suggests that, by perfecting our Craft, we can hope to attain that metaphoric mansion and achieve something similar to the apotheosis enjoyed by Orpheus and the other mythical figures of the night sky. In this Masonic lecture, the Seven Stars of the tracing board represent seven Master Masons who have reached this goal. The same common English working also teaches:

The Universe is the Temple of that Deity whom we serve. Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are about His throne as Pillars of His Works, for His Wisdom is infinite, His Strength omnipotent, and His Beauty shines through the whole of the creation in symmetry and order. The Heavens He has stretched forth as a canopy, He has planted the earth as his footstool, He has crowned His Temple with stars as with a diadem, and in His hands He extends the power and glory. The Sun and Moon are messengers of His Divine Will and all His laws are concord.¹¹

This regal representation of the Deity calls to mind the Book of Revelation. Revelation 1:4 describes seven spirits before the throne of God. These seven spirits have been called the “governors of the world.” Revelation 1:16 also describes the Deity as holding seven stars in his right hand. In Zechariah 4:10, the seven stars represent the seven eyes of God:

For who has despised the day of small things? But these seven will be glad when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel—these are the eyes of the LORD which range to and fro throughout the earth.

Knowing that the early Masons were well-versed in biblical traditions, it seems easy to understand that the Seven Stars would represent seven translated beings elevated and given guardianship over the world. The great eighteenth-century editor of the Masonic lectures, William Preston, preserved a key teaching about the Seven Stars in his catechism about Jacob’s Ladder and the Form of the Lodge. According the early Prestonian lecture, ascending the Ladder leads to:

... the possession of a Mansion, not built by human hand, veiled from mortal eyes by the starry firmament; the *receptacle of the virtuous*, which existed before the world began; and will to eternity endure. [It is described by] a representation of the heavens; where amidst the planets moving in various orbits we discover *seven brilliant stars shining truly resplendent*. [...F]rom their number we deduce the number that adds perfection to our system, and in the union of all the degrees of the order, by that number we complete the harmony of the Lodge.¹²

In Preston, therefore, we find evidence of both important ideas: the heavenly homecoming of the starry firmament, and that the Seven Stars represent seven Master Masons who have attained enlightenment. Therefore, let us strive to imitate them. Let us remember that we too have a heavenly nature, that we are children of the earth and the starry heaven. As modern science has taught us, “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.”¹³

NOTES

- 1 Nathan St. Pierre, “The Theological Ladder: The Virtues as a Path of Ascent.” *Philalethes: The Journal of Masonic Research & Letters* 66(2013): 122–25.
- 2 Albert G. Mackey, *A Lexicon of Freemasonry* (Philadelphia: Moss & Brother Co., 1858), 452.
- 3 L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 472.
- 4 Amos 5:8, Authorized Version, 1611.
- 5 C. C. Hunt, *Masonic Concordance of the Holy Bible* (World Publishing Co.: 1948), 240.
- 6 Petelia Tablet (OF 476), 6–7, in ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path, edited by Radcliffe Guest Edmonds (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22, translation added.
- 7 Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 1975), liii.
- 8 Franz Hartmann, *The Life and the Doctrines of Philipus Theophrastus: Bombast of Hohenheim, known by the name of Paracelsus* (New York: Lovell, Coryell & Co., 1891), 812.
- 9 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Des Maurers Wandeln,” 1815. Translated by Thomas Carlyle.
- 10 *The Text Book of Freemasonry* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1870), 33.
- 11 *Text Book of Freemasonry*, 57.
- 12 Colin Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 195.
- 13 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 190.