

A Brief Introduction to Symbology and the Cabalistic Tree of Life

Given as a lecture / slideshow to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research,
Ancient Free and Accepted Masons

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You may have heard the description of Freemasonry as being a system of morality couched in allegory and portrayed in symbols. It is an old description, and as brother Littlewood pointed out to us on a previous education symbols are very much a part of our life especially in the Masonic Lodge. Yet maybe some of you think that you don't know much about symbology or how to tell what symbols mean. I intend to help you change that in the next few minutes. Symbology is easy, it is natural, and it is even fun. So what exactly is a symbol and why is it important?

And why do we as freemasons we to deal with symbols at all? What is it about symbols that makes them so important that we need to spend our time studying them, as certainly esoteric philosophers and advertising agencies have done the world over? I think a good answer to this question is that our minds do not speak in words. Human minds do not speak in words. Our minds speak in pictures.



Our minds speak in images, and there's a whole complicated part of our brain that takes the images we think in and translates the series of pictures for us into language. That language is different than thought has certainly been shown scientifically. If the manipulative language centers of the brain get damaged, it can happen that the patient is perfectly able to think but that he can no longer put his thoughts into language. Also of course the different people of the world speak different languages, they're all able to think, and so it is apparent that language and cognition are separate functions. The 'core processor' of our brain so to speak thinks in images, and as a result we get the aphorism "a picture is worth a thousand words". Certainly one could spend a thousand words describing this picture. But remember, it is the vision you see that is more real. The 1000 word description is only a translation attempt.



This is an esoteric symbol - A symbol with hidden meaning. And you can see that it would take a lot of words to try and explain what is going on in this picture, and even were I to describe it extensively to someone who is not a Freemason, someone who had not been in this situation, it would be difficult for them to fully understand its meaning. However someone who has been through the experience can look at this symbol and can remember the sounds, can recall possibly the names or faces of brethren present with them present at this solemn ceremony.¹

They may recall the time of day, the nature or faces of the principal officers. There are so many things that it brings to mind that arouses within our psyche a whole conflagration of emotions and memories of thoughts and feelings and emotions and of spiritual awareness all evoked from this one symbol.



Now here is a completely different symbol, a modern exoteric symbol. Exoteric, meaning known to the public, and of course you all know well what this simple symbol means. Although it is a modern symbol, it has taken on great power internationally. Symbols, whether esoteric or public, can be combined to create new meanings.



If I take the last two symbols in conjunction, all of a sudden it means a very different thing. The one symbol to us signifies a spiritual upliftment, but simply by conjoining it with another known symbol we have a great evil, a repression.



I like this one better. So you can see brothers, that symbols are powerful. The change of energy when I apply the international no symbol to the Masonic symbol is palpable. It is unmistakable. In each of our hearts, there was a great sinking or perhaps some anger. We all are symbologists. We may not think of ourselves that way, but every day we think in images, and the images that we use most, and our strongest to us, are the images to which we have attached the most emotion. Seeing as spiritual awakening and awareness is of the greatest emotional import, as is initiation, so these symbols run deep in our psyche.²

Symbols are often combined or connected with each other in some fashion just as those that I've showed you above though not usually so dramatically. I did that for effect just make sure you're awake and so you can understand how deep the symbols reach into our consciousness. More commonly symbols are used to elaborate each other.



For example here in the Chinese language is the symbol or character for tree.³



THE ROOT

If we take the tree symbol and combine it with another horizontal line we have the symbol for root because the root grows at the bottom of the tree. If you can imagine a root meaning “something that everything grows from” you can understand that in Chinese this symbol means root, and is also the character for origin, beginning, and source.⁴



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Symbols evolve as they are combined. If we take that same tree and add another tree to make woods, or two more and we have a forest. Of course that I am not asking you to learn Chinese, but rather to understand how symbols can build on or modify each other.⁵



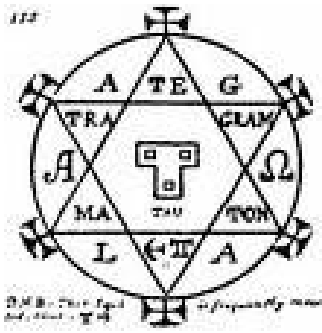
Moving off of Chinese to modern computer usage we run into the whole marvelous world of icons. Here are a few. These symbols are not esoteric, or hidden, they are meant to be as exoteric, or easily understood as possible. Universal instructions that transcend language.⁶



Attempting to create and implant their own symbol into your psyche is the primary goal of the world of corporate logos and advertising campaigns. Anyone NOT know what these two symbols mean?⁷



Each symbol activates a whole area of our psyche that is associated with all the things, situations and nuances we have picked up during our lives that are affiliated with that particular symbol and in one image it reflects a storehouse of information which everybody that is privy to this experience understands to a greater or lesser degree, and the symbol is therefore able to be used as a communication device far superior to any number of words attempting to explain what is so apparent in a small picture. At least this is true for the exoteric or public symbols.⁸

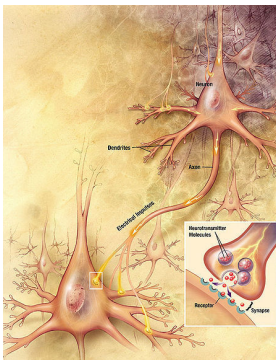


The esoteric or hidden symbols take more understanding, and convey much more complex meanings, as we saw with the picture of the freemasons embracing. Here you can see a hexagram from the Key of Solomon, and see a more complex combination of symbols. We have the circle, two interlocking equilateral triangles forming a six pointed star, the Tetragrammaton or YHVH, the Alpha and the Omega which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and often symbolize the beginning and the end. In the center is the Tau Cross, with three dots for the trinity. In the four corners are AGLA, for Ateh Gibor Le Olam Adonai, or “Thou art mighty for ever oh Lord”. And each intersection of triangle with circle is blessed with a cross.⁹

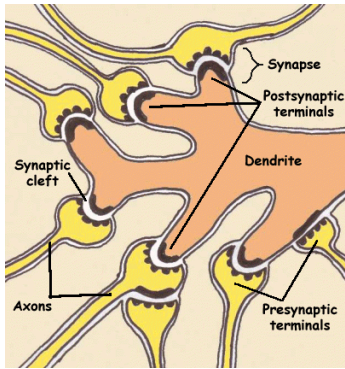
Brethren there are a huge number of esoteric symbols, and as we start to look at the number of symbols available to us, how are we supposed remember and to keep straight what they all mean and so forth? And here is where esoteric symbology becomes interesting, because the meanings are retained not so much through memory as through awareness. It is said the amount of error in our vision is capable of perpetual diminution, and one way we diminish our errors is to expand our vision, is to expand our consciousness, to expand our ability to perceive the fruits and mysteries of the universe, to expand our ability to perceive the relationships and connections between things. We do this through the process of realization.

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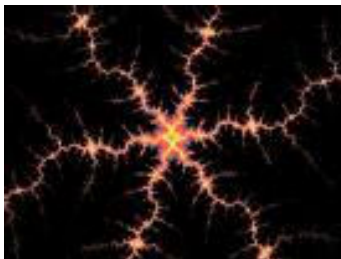
Recently in brother Littlewood’s presentation on symbolism he mentioned the number 42 as having been reflected in the 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness and the two tablets of Moses combining to make 42. And I could see some minds thinking “well that's stretching it a bit”. But I actually very much enjoyed it because it portrays the way the mind can lead us to spiritual truths from seemingly trivial information and the information itself is not important, the realization is what's important!



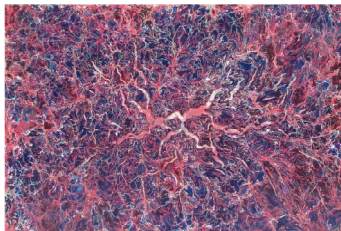
When we go to look for truth and new understanding, basically what we do is reorganize all the old truths that we are familiar with around us and we put them all in juxtaposition to each other, like nerve synapses preparing to fire.¹⁰



We say here is this truth here, and this truth here, and this truth here, all hanging around like nerve fiber with synapses on the end waiting for a connection to occur and suddenly the realization occurs, that if all these are true then *this new truth* must also be true and we suddenly connect the dots between the synapses of possibility and truth to create a new picture. ¹¹



As the electrical connection is made the light goes on and we say “ah ha I know!” and we have a new realization. And this process of connecting the symbolic synapses is sort of the way we achieve our conscious expansion and our expanded awareness of the world and of deity. ¹²

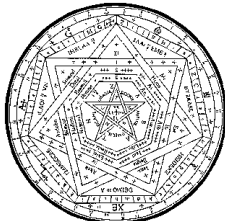


So now we are living with all these symbolic synapses hanging around, waiting to fire off and give us illumination, and we have got to have some boxes to keep them in. There are too many symbols, and it can be impossible to keep them organized and they are cluttering up our minds and so we need an organization system. And that's why I personally reached for the Cabala and the tree of life because this filing system is already ingrained into our lives whether we know it or not. It's a nice easy system to use to do the filing and the organization and see the relationships between the symbols. ¹³

The Cabala is a system of organizing and understanding symbols that was created transmitted to us largely by Jewish mystical scholars. But I think we would do the system an injustice to say that it was Jewish or even religious. I believe it was built to transcend religion. It was built to help us to understand the relationship between the symbols of all different religions and ways of attaining truth and to understand our own relation to the universe and to God. And most importantly, because it is the main founding system of our whole Judeo Christian tradition which we have lived in largely for the last 2000 years, it's very easy for us to learn because it's already embedded in our psyche and our language.

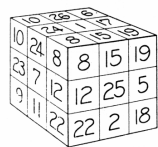
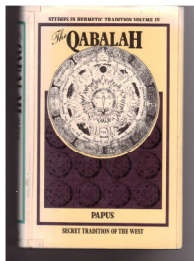
Cabala, or in Hebrew 1bq

So without further preamble let's talk about what the Cabala is and how it allows us to organize our symbols on the tree of life, and how quickly one can start to see the relationship between the different symbols and systems of thought. The word Cabala has been spelled many different ways including (Kaballah, Qabala). The reason for the different spellings is that it is a Hebrew word, which they spell QBL, so all our various spellings are just attempts to approximate the sound of the Hebrew word.



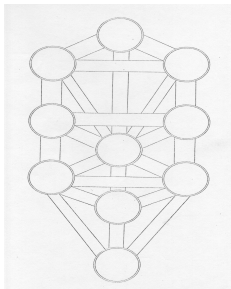
The Sigillum Dei Aemeth

Cabala is sort of a cover word for a whole system of esoteric thought, preserved and developed by the Hebrew rabbis. It is a very large system, and undoubtedly complex, but even though many of us are unaware of its existence, its symbols and way of thinking form the foundation of our Western philosophy and much of the modern esoteric tradition.¹⁴

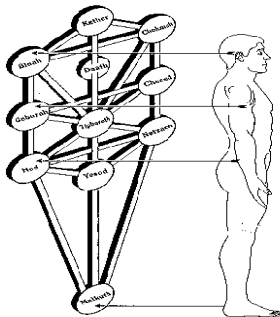


Totals = 42.

Cabala covers many subjects, and ranges from representations of the universe to complex mathematical codes, from the Hebrew holy books called the Zohar and the Yetsirah to the modern penchant for the ancient tarot cards.¹⁵



Today I will focus on one particular cabalistic diagram called the tree of life. The tree of life is an artificial construction, a diagram as it were of our universe. This diagram is as useful as you make it, because basically what it's giving you is an empty filing cabinet, and that filing cabinet is already pre-indexed with certain place markers that are already also in our psyche. These are shown as Sefirah or spheres, each of which can be used as a filing drawer for the archetypal energies familiar to us all.¹⁶

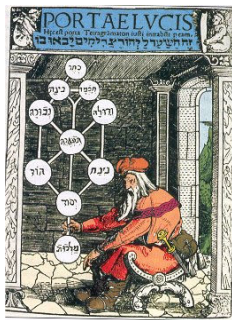


Although it is just a way of looking at things, an artificial construct, it is so much a part of our way of thinking in the Western world that we accept it without even thinking about it, often without realizing it exists. Christians who use the sign of the cross when entering the church may say "thou art the power and the glory" as they touch their left and right shoulders, unaware that these are translations of the names of these spheres, and appropriately attributed to the planets Mars and Jupiter.¹⁷

Is the Cabala masonic? Not really. But many Masons have studied the system and have used it extensively both in their writings and their art, for the essence of Cabala is learning to understand the relationship between symbols, and many symbols, such as the pillars Boaz and Jachin, are integral to both.



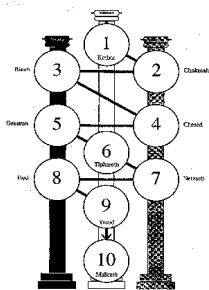
As you can see from these trees from Sumeria, the Cabbalistic system may be very old indeed.^{18 19}



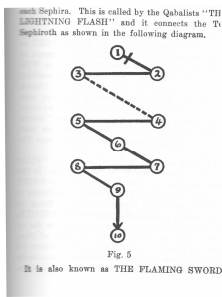
In fact the tree of life has been used by philosophers for centuries for codifying the relationships between symbols, and between man and deity. "Portae lucis" (shown at the top of this old woodcut) is Latin for "the gateways of light."²⁰



This then for me is one of the primary uses of the tree of life. All the symbols are on the tree of life, brethren. It is a marvelous system by which you keep them organized and learn to understand the relationships between them. Essentially it is a filing system. Like a coat rack, and the Sephiroth and the paths between them are the hangers.²¹



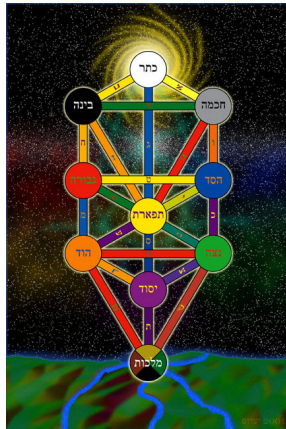
So how does it work? The basics are simple, for the Tree of Life comprises the numbers from one to 10, and even in that simple expression of progression of numbers, we have great mysteries made available, for we have the three pillars of the temple revealed. The number one at the top represents the unity, the godhead, the point from which all light emanates. It is called Kether, and its main symbol is the crown. The number 10, at the bottom, is the manifest world, the flesh and blood, ink and paper. Its name is Malkuth, the Earth.²²



This diagram shows the lightning flash of creation where the absolute descends through the four worlds of the Yetzirah to become manifest in the form we know it, matter and flesh.²³



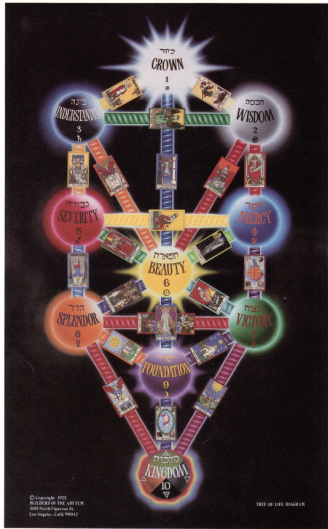
Returning back up the tree we can show the ascent of the serpent of wisdom, up the Gnostic Jacob's Ladder.²⁴



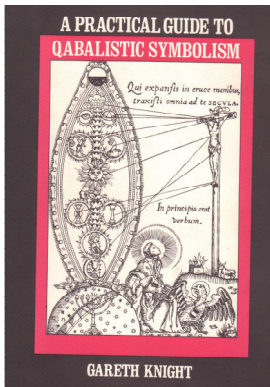
All the elements of our traditional mythologies fit more or less neatly, and we can start to see the relationships between symbols. The four worlds, the four elements, the seven planets of the ancients, the twelve signs of the zodiac and many other systems all interplay to begin to create a symbiosis of archetypal thought that allows us to begin to conceptualize the ineffable. For example 7 is the number of mystery and luck, so it is no surprise we find it associated with the emotion desire, and consequently associated with the Goddess Venus from the Roman Pantheon, and Aphrodite from the Greek and so forth. The plant attributed to Venus is the Rose, the weapon is the girdle.²⁵

Sphere	Animal	Color (Flower or Scent)	English (Meaning)	Hebrew (Name)	Intelligence	Magical Weapon	Element	Planet	Elementary Sphere	Stone
1	God	White Brilliance	Clown	Keter	Adaptation Or Hidden Intelligence	Swastika Or Furrow Plow, Cross	Aetherion	Asherah Or Flower	Primal Matter	Diamond
2	Man	Grey	Widow	Chokmah	Elucidating Intelligence	The Ladder, The Staff, Scales Or Ladder	Merk	Amethyst	Zodiac Or Fixed Stars	Star Ruby, Turquoise
3	Woman	Black	Understander	Binah	Secretive Intelligence	The Veil, The Dark Rules Of Concealment	Merkh, Chet	Cypress, Opium Poppy	Satan	Star Sapphire, Pearl
4	Children	Blue	Mother	Chesed	Mourning, Calmness Or Receptacular Intelligence	The Word, Scales Or Cross	Chet	Olive, Bismarck	Jupiter	Amethyst And Sapphire
5	Basilisk, Lion, Child	Scarlet Red	Strength	Geburah	Radical Intelligence	Swastika, Spear, Scepter Or Chariot	Tiphon	Old, New Mistle, Nettle	Mars	Ruby
6	Phoenix, Lion, Child	Yellow	Daunt	Tiphareth	Intelligence Of The Mediating Influence	The Ladder Or Broom Cross	Chesed	Acorn, New, Lamb, Yew	Sun	Topaz, Yellow Diamond
7	Light	Emerald	Victory	Netzach	Ornate Intelligence	The Lamp And Circle	Binah, New, Red Sack	Rose	Venus	Emerald
8	Therianthrope, Jackal	Orange	Splendor	Hod	Abstract Or Faded Intelligence	The Horns And Ventrals, The Arrow	Sethor	Milk, Auburn-red Lemon	Mercury	Opal, Hornstone, Fire Opal
9	Elephant	Violet	Foundation	Yesod	Pure Or Clear Intelligence	The Perfumes And Scales	Jehemah, Gaming, No Lemon Rose	Saffron, Mandrill, Dandelion	Luna	Quartz
10	Sphinx	Crimson, Olive, Russet And Black	Kingdom	Malkuth	Responsive Intelligence	Magical Circle And Triangle	Binah Or Cross	Willow, Lily, Ivy	The Mercuries	Rock Crystal

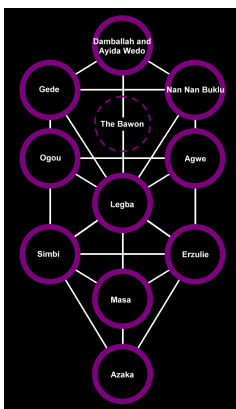
Tables of correspondences showing the relationship between different symbols have been constructed. This architecture allows for easy cross reference between different systems.²⁶



For example: to the active number 5 is attributed strength. Thus the affiliation to the body is the right arm. Dieu et mon droit. Mars the god of war and force in the Roman pantheon, as is Tue in the Norse pantheon, and Aries in the Greek. All are allocated to the Sephirah of Geburah (Hebrew word for strength and power). And anyone familiar with martial energy will have no trouble telling me the color is red. This stuff is so much a part of us, that it is embedded in our language. We go red with anger, and green with jealousy, right? Is anyone surprised to find that the metals associated with Mars and martial energy are iron and steel? Or that gold is the metal of the sun? Silver of the Moon? The Cabala has permeated our whole understanding and construct of existence, and yet not one in 1000 of the common people even know these keys to the temple are available to those who are willing to study.²⁷



For many hundreds of years, Philosophers and great thinkers have used the Tree of Life to categorize and to meditate on the great keys of the mystic art. Here is a Syriac tree from the 1600s, showing associations with Christian mysticism,²⁸



and here is one with the principal deities or Loas of the Vodoun. There are no sphere labels on the Syriac tree, but you can read on the Vodoun tree that Ogou would be their deity of strength and war, whilst Erzuli would be the temptress and woman of power. Even though I know little about Vodoun, I can quickly see from the diagram who they consider the principle forces, and the nature of their basic functions.²⁹

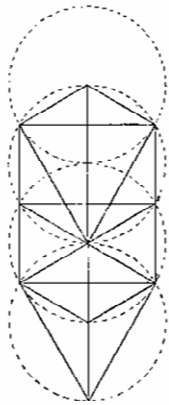
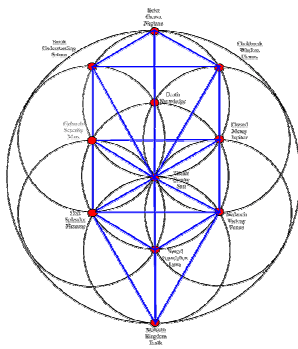
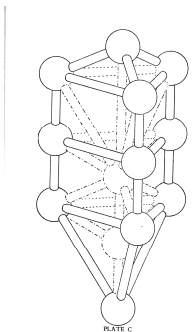


Figure 11

The Tree of Life is not just a pretty picture. It is constructed using only square and compass, in keeping with the precepts of sacred geometry, and has the elements of many theorems proven by its structure. It is constructed by the union of four overlapping circles, symbolic of the four worlds of the Yetzirah, which are also attributed to the ancient elements of Fire, air, water, and earth. The overlap of these circles forms a trinity of vesica pisces, one of the most holy symbols of freemasonry, as it forms the basis of the science of geometry, and of even the first proposition of Euclid. In the bottom vesica you can see the formation of the two equilateral triangles, each bisected. $A^2 + b^2 = C^2$.³⁰

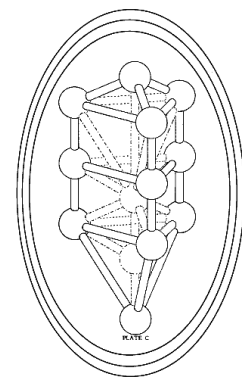


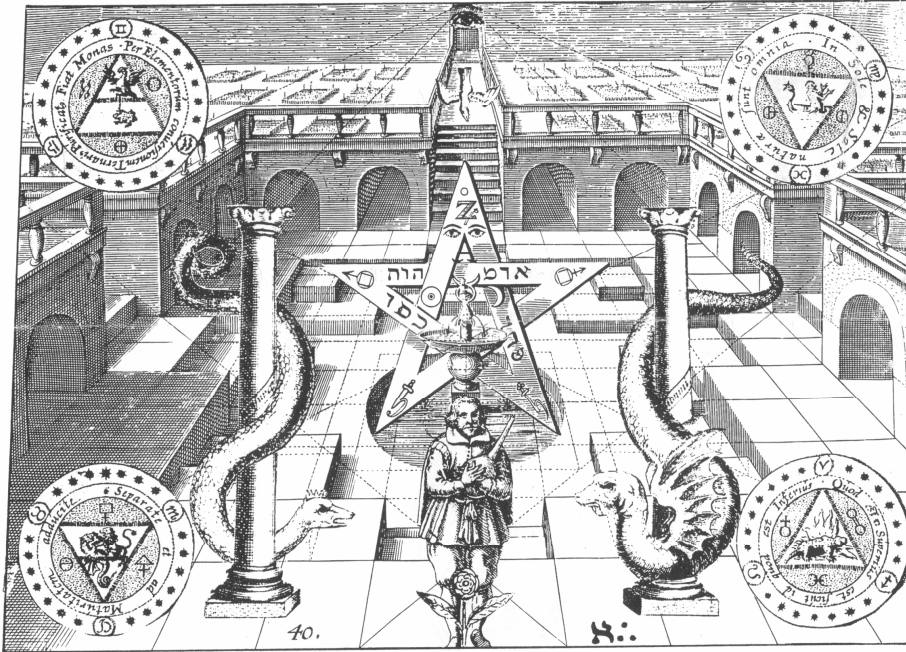
When the bottom three circles (manifest below the supernal triad) are shown in full, we can again see the beauty of the sacred geometry. Some of you may notice that its construction even forms a flower of six vesica pisces around its center, our heart, the sphere Tipareth, attributed to the Sun, beauty, and resurrection, and thus to Osiris, Mithras, and to the rose cross and the Christos.
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Not static, or two-dimensional, it can be animated into 3 dimensions where it becomes the "seed of life".³²

Surrounded by the triple veil of the negative, it becomes the cosmic egg.



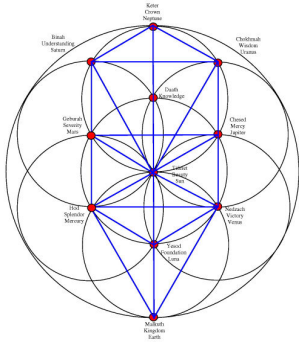


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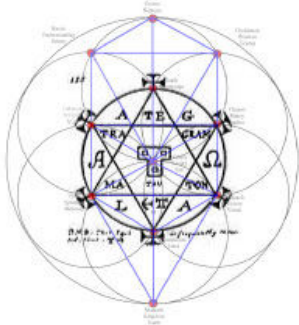
Brethren, as you can see it is a huge system of correspondences, and I could go on at length but I may have already taxed your patience. I will leave it to you to investigate further. But I would like to impress you with one point. Masonic tradition suggests an effort to increase your Masonic knowledge every day. Masonic knowledge, by the very definition of Masonry, involves the study of symbols. There are a lot of symbols, and without a system to organize them and their meanings, it is difficult if not impossible to understand all their various meanings, and to see the relationship between them. If we have a system of any sort, we have a chance. With the Cabala and the tree of life, we have the system with which most of our Western Mystery tradition was constructed, and the system with which most of our holy books were coded, thus placing the keys in our own hands. As a result, when faced with a more complex symbolic representation, such as the above early drawing of the esoteric structure of Solomon's Temple,



or a diagram of the rose cross with the pelican, we have a solid base from which to commence our studies. Here Kether is shown as the crown, Tipareth as the rose cross, the pelican as the wings of YHVH and the compass legs as the outer pillars.³⁴

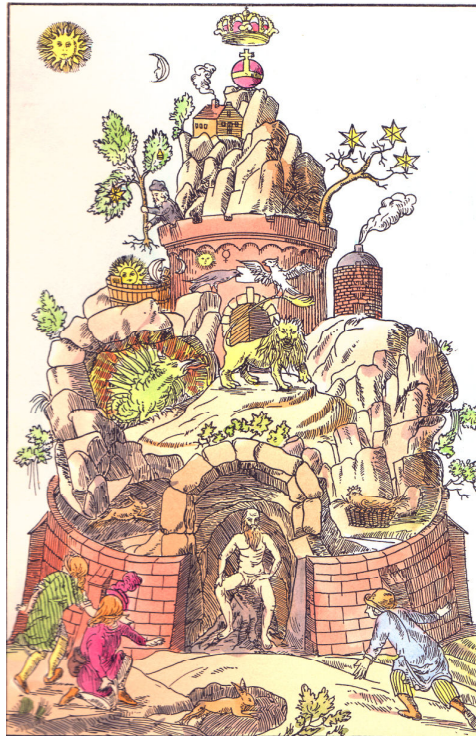


Finally, when looking once again at the diagram of the sacred geometry, and the six vesica pisces, it reminded me of the Seal of Solomon we had look at earlier, and the six crosses at the intersections of the triangles with the circle, and I wondered if just possibly they were connected, so I resized them and superimposed them, and voila! ³⁵



Now we can see that the alpha and the omega are the pillars of light and darkness, the crosses are the sephiroth, the tau in the middle is indeed the emblem of resurrection and the Christos, placed on the sphere of Tiphareth. Brethren this is a living example of the way the expansion of consciousness works. When I started writing this lecture I had no idea this version of the Seal of Solomon was based on the tree of life. I picked it as a random esoteric symbol, and found it revealed through considering it in the light of the cabala and the tree of life.

Symbology is truly a way to the light of revealed truth, and we have been given the keys or Atus of Thoth, the Egyptian God of Wisdom. What I have written here is not meant to explain Cabala or symbology, but rather to form a starting point for your own explorations. I strongly encourage your continued study. ³⁶



References for Illustrations

- ¹ On line image, found at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/mas/dun/img/12100.jpg>
- ² Ibid.,
- ³ On line image, found at <http://z.about.com/d/chineseculture/1/0/b/d/5/zi00082.gif>
- ⁴ On line image, found at http://www.designboom.com/contest/files/the_root.jpg
- ⁵ On line image, found at <http://z.about.com/d/chineseculture/1/0/N/4/forest.gif>
- ⁶ Stock web icons for email, caution.
- ⁷ Windows® registered logo. Yellow Pages® registered logo.
- ⁸ Microsoft® clip art
- ⁹ The Hexagram of Solomon, taken from Mathers (trans) *Lemegaton, or Lesser Key of Solomon*, Crowley ed. (1995) P73
- ¹⁰ On line image, found at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/a/a6/Chemical_synapse_schema.jpg
- ¹¹ On line image, found at <http://www.mult-sclerosis.org/synapse.gif>
- ¹² On line image, found at <http://sprott.physics.wisc.edu/FRACTALS/collect/2006/ganglia.jpg>
- ¹³ On line image, found at <http://erikwhite.com/gravxsz/24x36/Synapse.jpg>
- ¹⁴ The Segillium Dei Ameth of Dr. John Dee, taken from Campbell, Colin D., *The Magic Seal of Dr. John Dee* (2009) P7
- ¹⁵ Papus, *The Qabalah* (1977) Front scan of Dust Jacket
- ¹⁶ Scan of blank tree of life, author's collection
- ¹⁷ On line image, found at http://www.plotinus.com/tree_of_life2.gif
- ¹⁸ On line image, found at <http://www.crystalinks.com/sumergodstree.jpg>
- ¹⁹ Von Daniken, *In Dearch of Ancient Gods* (1973) P25
- ²⁰ On line image, found at http://www.b12partners.net/mt/images/Tree_of_Life_Medieval.jpg
- ²¹ On line image, unknown source
- ²² Untitled photocopy, author's collection
- ²³ Achad, *QBL or the Bride's Reception*, (1974) P11
- ²⁴ On line image, found at <http://www.crystalinks.com/tolsnake.gif>
- ²⁵ On line image, found at <http://www.hermeticsoft.com/TreeOfLife.jpg>
- ²⁶ Author's table, based on Crowley, *777 and Other Qabalistic Writings* (1970) PP
- ²⁷ On line image, found at <http://tarothermeneutics.com/classes/images/TreeOfLifetarot.jpg>
- ²⁸ Tree of Life from Syriac New Testament, Vienna ,1555, taken from Knight, *A Practical Guide to Qabalistic Symbolism* (1965) frontispiece
- ²⁹ Glassman, *Voodoo Visions* web image from http://www.gede.org/images/glassman_tree_of_life.gif
- ³⁰ Achad, *The Anatomy of the Body of God* (1972) P6
- ³¹ On line image, found at http://expandinghorizons.biz/assets/images/Tree_of_Life_geometry2.jpg
- ³² Achad, *The Anatomy of the Body of God* (1972) P68
- ³³ Untitled photocopy in author's collection. Anyone knowing its origin, please contact the author.
- ³⁴ On line image, found at http://www.occultofpersonality.net/wp-content/uploads/rose_croix.jpg
- ³⁵ On line image, found at http://expandinghorizons.biz/assets/images/Tree_of_Life_geometry2.jpg
- ³⁶ Unknown, *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*, Altona Manuscript, AMORC ed (1935) P11