

The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences and their correspondences to the Tree of Life

30-Oct-2011

In Masonry we are instructed to study the liberal arts and sciences, extend our researches into the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science and to gain an understanding of ourselves. Other than our formal education, we tend not to take the study of the Arts and Sciences much further.

So let us first take a look at the definitions of the liberal arts and sciences.

Grammar: The science of structure and usages of language.

Rhetoric: The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing.

Logic: The science of reasoning, proof, thinking or inference.

Arithmetic: The science of numbers.

Geometry: The science of properties and relations of lines, surfaces etc.

Music: The art of expressing or causing emotion by melodious and harmonious combination of notes.

Astronomy: The study of Heavenly bodies.

Grammar

For many of us, our default starting position is to think Grammar from the perspective of the English language and from a British cultural background built on warfare, scientific and industrial advancement. However, if we apply our thinking to the Hebrew language and its associated systems of learning, the arts and sciences may have a different significance. Taking the 32 paths on the Tree of Life, we find that each of the main paths (Sephiroth) is designated by a Hebrew word and each lesser path is designated by a Hebrew letter. An understanding of Hebrew grammar is therefore necessary to understand the implications and correspondences of the paths.

It should be noted that Hebrew was not the everyday language of the Jews. It was (and still is) classed as sacred - God's language. It was not to be debased and used for ordinary speech, communication or commerce, but was reserved for prayer and communicating God's Word.

Secondly, it should be realised that direct language is incapable of explaining thoughts fully as we are restricted by grammar and syntax of the language in use. In the same way that sentiments and passions are better described by immaterial language such as music and art. Hebrew, however, is a system of symbols with meaning other than their face value. It consists of 22 letters, classified as three mother letters, seven double letters and twelve simple letters. Each letter has first a phonetic value, second a numerical value, third a positive idea when it is alone, fourth a relative idea when accompanied by other letters and fifth, it has an effective and talismanic power combining at the same time, thought, word and action.

The three mother letters (Aleph, Mem and Shin) represent Air, Water and Fire.

The seven double letters are attributed to the seven planets (the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), the seven days of creation and the seven directions in space (the first direction being the centre composed of Air, Water and Fire and bounded by Spirit, followed by above, below, in-front, behind, right and left).

The twelve simple letters correspond to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the twelve months of the year and to the twelve human properties (hearing, sight, smell, speech, taste, love, work, movement, anger, mirth, imagination and sleep).

Rhetoric

Each of the ten Sephiroth from Kether to Malkuth also represents a different state of existence or evolution which can be applied to the physical, astral and spiritual worlds. The paths linking each Sephira show their connections and dependencies to each other as well as the extremes of the two outer pillars and the balance of the middle pillar. By following the paths during meditation we begin to

train our minds enabling us to see the whole plan with a clearer understanding of the objective, enabling us to order our thoughts. If we then apply these lessons and levels of understanding during our daily undertakings in the material world, we may do so with greater clarity enabling us to communicate with a higher degree of effectiveness. A renowned Jewish Management Consultant (Eliyahu Goldratt) uses what he calls Current Reality, Future Reality and Transitional Trees in his work. These have very close links with the Tree of Life and use the concept of cause and effect to move from one “Sephira” to the next to achieve the desired outcome.

Logic

To ascend or descend the Tree there are a number of paths that can be taken. However, to do this progressively and with balance, a logical sequence must be followed – the lightning flash. Each pathway is numbered as is each Sephirah and the lightning flash ascends and descends accordingly. This in itself teaches logic as it causes us to think and reason as we follow the paths and it also gives us the ability to apply logic to any number of problems we meet by using the Tree as a model for defining the paths and stages necessary to reach a given outcome.

Arithmetic

The Gematria is the system of assigning a number to each Hebrew letter and thence meaning to each number. Therefore a word or phrase written in Hebrew will have a deeper meaning hidden in its numerical value. This numerical value (and therefore the esoteric meaning) can be manipulated to give a desired result by using different letters to spell the same word as some Hebrew letters are interchangeable. There are also other methods of manipulating numbers such as Theosophic Reduction and Theosophic Addition. By reducing a number to form a single digit, another meaning can be found for a given word or phrase, and by adding all of the numbers below itself down to one, a further meaning. Obviously, this is not advanced mathematics in the traditional sense, but it gives a wider understanding that numbers can be used to represent concepts and that the science of numbers is farther reaching than just the numerical values. There are also some numbers that behave in certain ways, nine for instance and phi the Golden Ratio found throughout Nature.

These may not seem to be directly associated with the Tree, but bear in mind that the Tree is also a representation of Adam Kadmon and therefore linked to Creation and the human form.

Geometry

The conventional diagram of the Tree is formed by two overlapping hexagons with an equilateral triangle at the base. Each point on the two hexagons and the triangle form one of the Sephiroth.

The whole Tree can be constructed by Euclidean geometry using only a pair of compasses, a straight edge and a pencil. The diagram itself contains a square, rectangle, isosceles triangle, rightangle triangle, cube, vesica piscis etc. It should be noted though, that the Tree is actually a three dimensional object with four outer pillars around a central pillar, forming a double cube with a pyramid at the head and base.

Music

Music is the transmission of vibrations at an audible level. The Solfeggio scale (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti), follows the lightning flash from Kether down to Hod, returning to “do” in Malkuth, and the vibration sound of certain words at a given pitch is used in various meditation techniques and vibration is present in all material things at an atomic level. The Tree then becomes a visual representation of musical scales corresponding to material objects. The Tree, being a representation of the Macrocosm as well as the Microcosm, also ties in the concept of “The Music of the Spheres” in which the proportions and movements of the heavenly bodies is regarded as a form of music.

Astronomy

Each Sephiroth and the connecting paths have a planet, zodiacal sign, element, colour or deity associated with it along with their corresponding attributes. Astronomy and astrology in ancient times being one and the same thing, a good understanding of the subject would have been required to understand the whole of the Tree, particularly at key periods – moon phases, equinoxes, solstices etc

and for the phenomena of Precession through the Zodiac as the Hebrew alphabet also corresponds to the days of the week, months of the year etc.

The Tree of Life (in its usual diagrammatic representation) consists of three pillars – the Middle Pillar, the Pillar of Severity and the Pillar of Mercy, which, in the Kabbalah, are called Gomer, Oz and Dabar; in English, Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. The Tree of life then encompasses all of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences to one degree or another: Grammar (in the study of the Hebrew language), Rhetoric (in that it is an aid in ordering our thoughts), Logic (in that we are shown a progression, with possible causes and effects, to an ultimate objective), Arithmetic (in the study of esoteric numerology), geometry (in the construction of the Tree itself), Music (in the scales of the Sephiroth) and Astronomy (in the planetary and astrological correspondences). By extending our knowledge of the Liberal Arts and Sciences, we see that we are also making advancement into the Hidden Mysteries of Nature and Science. Finally, by following the paths of the Tree, we may begin to obtain an understanding of our selves. Thus, the objects of study in the three Craft degrees may be found in the Tree of Life just as the Tree is found in all Lodges in that each pillar of the Tree is represented by the three Pillars on which Masonry rests – Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.