

**JEWEL OF THE 25<sup>th</sup> DEGREE**

**25<sup>th</sup> Degree Essay**

**College of the Consistory**

**Submitted by**

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## Introduction

The lecture of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree contains a complex mixture of matters drawn from a collection made over many centuries and from several civilizations. From the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree lecture, Albert Pike drew a relatively small portion for the ritual of the Degree. Recent revisionists have furthered narrowed this focus. Although the focus of the original Pike ritual was on Islam, as is the revised ritual, there is nothing of substance in the lecture relating to Islam.

The jewel of the Degree is a concoction of three elements drawn by Albert Pike from the breadth of time and civilizations referred to in his lecture of the Degree. The jewel is a challenging device to interpret. Surprisingly, there seems to be little variation in the interpretations of the jewel made by Masonic authors Hutchens (2006) and de Hoyos (2008). The interpretation presented here bares little resemblance to that of others. Albert Pike understood that not all interpret symbols in the same way, and perhaps intended for this to be the case, for he states: "... a visible symbol to the eye of another is not to inform him of the meaning which that symbol has to you." (Pike, 1962, p. 513)

The three elements of the jewel are the tau cross, a circle entwined by a serpent and attached to the top of the cross and the two Hebrew words of inscription on the cross. The words of inscription are the most difficult to understand and interpret.

## The Hebrew Inscriptions נהשתן and הלת

The horizontal of the tau cross is inscribed with the word, נהשתן meaning 'something made of copper'. In the Bible this Hebrew word is used once, and that is in 2Kings 18:4, where Hezekiah, king of Judah, broke the brazen serpent: "he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and he called it, נהשתן (Nehushtan). There is no apparent reason to interpret the Hebrew inscription to have any other meaning.

The second Hebrew word, הלת is inscribed on the vertical of the tau cross. Based on the content of Strong (2007), this word does not mean, 'suffer or suffering' and was not used to mean 'wounded' in any of the Books alleged to have been written by Moses, or in 2Kings. Perhaps Pike obtained the word elsewhere and Hutchens (2006, p. 199) and de Hoyos (2008, p. 497) are correct that the word means: 'he has suffered/been wounded' and 'he has been/is wounded', respectively. It is difficult to understand how the brazen serpent could be considered wounded if it had been broken into pieces. A Hebrew to English lexicon of the Old Testament indicates that the word does mean 'wounded', agreeing with the generally accepted Scottish Rite interpretation. It is possible that the word refers not to the serpent but to those stricken by the serpent. Another opinion concerning the meaning of the word written on the vertical of the tau cross, and offered by two students at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is that, 'I was afraid' or 'to fear'. The notion of being afraid could be said to characterize those who were beholding the copper serpent that Moses had made. Surely, if those around them were dying of the

serpents' strikes, the individuals beholding Moses' serpent would have to consider themselves to be much more than simply suffering or having been wounded; they had to be fully within the grip of death itself.

There is yet another interpretation. From Strong (2007, p. 1497), we find that if the last two letters of, י ה ל ה are transposed, the Hebrew word would mean, 'trinket.' This explanation seems plausible and reasonable given that the brazen serpent was only an idol or ornament. The interpretation of the two words would be that the copper serpent fashioned by Moses was but a trinket, and not worthy of reverence. The serpent symbolized a faith wrongly placed; the determination made by Hezekiah.

The point of Pike in using these two words would have been to remind us that God can create anything he wants, including an evil; and, He can provide a remedy for that evil as well. God intended for man to know of these powers, but at the same time, man was not to fall victim to placing his faith in idols or figurines. When the serpent was cast by Moses the intent was that faith in God, while beholding of the trinket would cure the illness brought on by the strike/bite of the serpent. Later, the children of Israel made the mistake of placing their faith in the trinket itself.

### **The Tau Cross**

The tau cross is named for its resemblance to the capital Greek letter, tau (T). Sometimes the tau cross is depicted with an attached loop or handle and named the crux ansata. The word ansata is from the Latin, 'ansatus' meaning handle. As will be discussed below, the circle with the entwined serpent on the jewel of the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree does not represent the loop or handle associated with the ancient Egyptian crux ansata.

The ancient tau cross being carried by a handle is shown in Hutchens (1993, p. 121) on the right side of the illustration of the Egyptian Court of the Dead (held in the woman's right hand). What did this 'portable' tau cross mean to the ancient Egyptians? Many understand it to be a hieroglyph meaning life. We take life to mean a consciousness of existence in time, and interpret the tau cross to be symbolic of time itself. Time – created by God for mankind; something not in heaven and conveyed to man by the pattern and motions of the luminaries and celestial bodies.

If the tau cross is stood in the ground with its arms oriented east and west, its shadow may serve to measure time interval. When the sun begins to move south of east the shadow of the eastern arm of the cross will point downward and the shadow of the western arm will point upward. The shadow of the two arms rotates with time, becoming parallel with the ground when the sun reaches meridian. As the sun moves toward the west, the shadow of the western arm will point downward and the shadow of the eastern arm will point upward. Returning to the illustration cited above; observe the staff with a short arm attached at the top, and held in the woman's left hand. That staff and its fixed rod might have been used to quantify the time interval set by the moving shadow of the tau cross. The rod on the staff seems to be set at 15°, which is the amount of earth's

rotation in one hour. The staff could also have served to measure hours during the night by sighting the rotation of stars about the celestial pole.

Pike has incorporated the tau cross because it represents time – one of the greatest mysteries made for man. We can reason many things about time and time-interval; but, we are left to accept on faith that there is such a thing.

### **The Circle Entwined by a Serpent**

Our interpretation of this symbol reflects the need for both faith and reason – and that a harmonious outcome requires their balanced application. The most ancient civilization to express itself in writing, and to have devised a means for preserving their written expression, was the Sumerian, nearly 6,000 years ago. We begin our analysis with these ancients. A lesson learned from the 18<sup>th</sup> Degree ritual – that evil exists in the world as well as in human nature - will also be incorporated.

The Sumerians recognized the existence of evil and chaos on earth and named her, Tiamat. The evils were revealed by storm, flood, earthquake and wild fire. Tiamat was symbolized by the pattern of stars (constellation) depicting a serpent, and to which they gave the name. The serpent, dragon or snake has continued to symbolize evil to civilizations well after the Sumerians, including the Greek, Jewish, Roman and others unto this day. Tiamat was named Hydra by the Greeks, depicting the dragon killed by Hercules in his second labor.

The serpent in the 25<sup>th</sup> Degree jewel represents evil, especially as it exists in the world. The world is depicted by the circle, which represents the girth of the earth – the equator. With the serpent depicted by the celestial constellation, Hydra, it is natural to depict the earth's equator by its projection on the celestial sphere – the celestial equator.

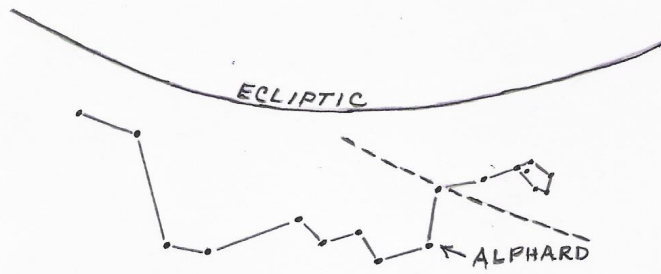
The current orientation of the constellation Hydra, with respect to the celestial equator, is very much like that observed by Albert Pike in the mid-1800s (see dashed line crossing Hydra in the top portion of the attached figure); which hardly conveys the idea of a circle entwined with a serpent. Pike left this interesting matter for us to consider and come to understand, as he no doubt had done for himself. The ecliptic is also shown in the top portion of the figure to serve as a reference. The celestial equator is currently located above Alphard, the brightest star in the constellation Hydra

We know of precession of the equinox; the movement of the vernal equinox along the ecliptic at a rate of about 30° in 2,000 years. We also recall that this precession is revealed by the circular motion of the celestial pole. With precession what is actually happening is a conic motion of the earth's axis of rotation anchored at the center of the earth. Since the equator is perpendicular to the axis of rotation, it and its projection on the celestial sphere also move in a circular fashion.

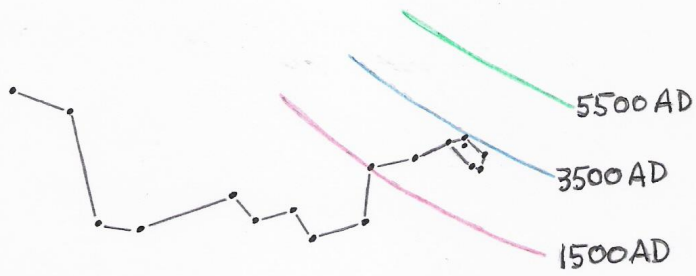
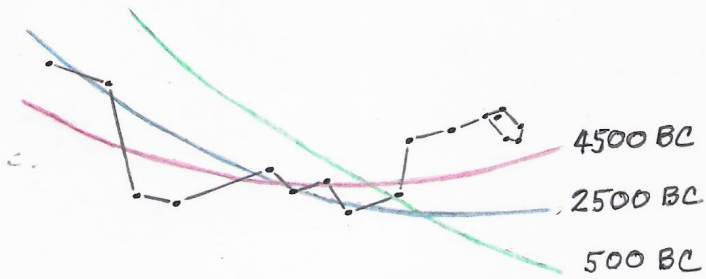
The circumstance 6,500 years ago, and viewed by the Sumerians, is shown in the mid portion of the figure along with the location of the celestial equator at 2,000 year

intervals. The serpent clearly entwines the celestial equator for as long as 3,000 years after the beginning of the Sumerian civilization. Thus the serpent and circle symbolism dates through the period of Egyptian pyramid building.

The lower portion of the figure illustrates the circumstance from the time of Columbus onward for the next 4,000 years. Depicted on the heavens, the serpent of evil will one day loose all of its attachment to the earth, as symbolized by the projection of earth's equator on the celestial sphere, and sink into the pit of darkness for a long, long while – hope springs eternal.



HYDRA/TIAMAT



LOCATIONS OF CELESTIAL EQUATOR

## References

Appreciation is extended to John Walker's website, "YourSky" for calculations of precession over 10 millennia used to make sketches presented in the figure.

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