

The Hephaestus Connection

By

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The Worshipful Master had called me to the lectern in the East, telling me firmly I had but five minutes. I thought for a moment and said, "How many of you have heard of Hephaestus?" The Lodge was virtually silent. One hand went up amidst a forest of blank looks.

"How about Vulcan?" This time, many more signs of recognition. One Brother even began to expound on who Vulcan was.

"Yes, I know," I said. "Vulcan was the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Hephaestus, who was the metalworker for the other gods of Mount Olympus. From Vulcan we get words such as 'volcano,' although the earlier Greek name has not influenced the English language much."

"According to the myth or legend," I continued, "Hephaestus was lame. Some versions hold that he was born that way and was so ugly in addition that Hera, wife of the chief god Zeus, had him thrown out of heaven. In other versions, it was Zeus himself who cast Hephaestus from the heights of Mt. Olympus for taking Hera's side in an argument between her and Zeus, and the fall from the heights of heaven led to his being lame. In some accounts, Hephaestus lands in the sea near the Isle of Lemnos, is raised by Thetis and Eurynome, and receives from them the basic training which leads to his mastering the arts of the smithy. In other accounts, Hephaestus falls all the way to the Underworld, where he undertakes to continue his role as craftsman to the gods, and whence the fire of his forges is observed on the surface as volcanic eruptions, lava flows, and the like.

"The account of the Fall of Lucifer in the Christian mythos can be traced directly to the legend of Hephaestus/Vulcan, as the early Christians who sought to convert the pagan Romans co-opted the Roman holidays and myths, converting them to Christian form. Many other examples of such syncretism, from the scheduling of Christmas to

coincide with the Roman Saturnalia, to the timing of the two feast days of St. John to occur at the solstices, to the use of symbols like mistletoe, eggs, and so on, may be found in Christianity; likewise, Judaism accommodated pagan ideas the Israelites encountered during the Babylonian Captivity by expanding on the ideas of angels from being mere messengers to constituting named entities, some hints of which may be found in the Scriptures themselves (Satan in the books of Job and Zechariah) and which were more widely expounded in the Talmud and the Kabbalah.

I turned to my right. "Brother Senior Deacon." He rose to his feet. "Who was T-C?"

"Te fi kn ar o cn wk i br ad o ml." A Mason well acquainted with the work, but I knew he was a District Instructor before summoning the audacity to surprise him thus.

"Indeed," I said, "and notice the similarity between this character of Jewish mythos and that of Hephaestus. Both are the prototypical smiths of the human race, and suggest that a far more ancient myth may well exist from which the stories of these two are derived. Be seated, Bro. Senior Deacon."

Had we been in Minnesota, where I received the degrees, I might have turned next to the Senior Steward and asked him, "Hw sh a cd b pr t b md a Mn?" But here in this jurisdiction, Stewards are not asked such a question before being dispatched to the preparing room. So I continued on my own.

"We pr a cd t b md a Mn by dv hi o al mn ad mt, ne nk no cl, bf no sh..." I looked around the room, to see interested, if puzzled faces. "In Masonry," I remarked, the symbol often conceals something else not so obviously related to it. And our teachings often end up misdirecting inquiries and study, as well. We are taught quite explicitly that being ne bf no sh alludes to a passage of Scripture in the Book of Ruth; most of us have heard that often enough to

need no reminder of its further meaning as confirmation of an action.

“But what is the consequence of being ne bf no sh? Does that peculiar situation not produce an oddity of gait, similar to that of *being lame*? Is it not therefore curious that we pr a cd t b md a Mn in such a way as to create a reference to the mythological character Hephaestus — at least a reference for those highly knowledgeable of the myths of antiquity, as so many of the Masons of the 17th and early 18th century were. And with the unquestionable connection between Hephaestus and T—C, we create a subtle connection between the very first part of our ceremonies to a pw which will not be introduced to the candidate until much later in his Masonic progression, but which, to the perceptive asserts the unmistakable unity of the degrees of Freemasonry.”