



Sidereal and Tropical Zodiacs

Basically there are two viewpoints of the zodiac in terms of its division into twelve signs, which in astrology are referred to as sidereal and tropical. The fundamental difference is that the former deals with things as they really are, taking account of not just the movement of the Sun through the zodiac every year but also the precessional movement of the Sun through the zodiac during the course of a Great Age of twelve Ages (c. 26,000 years). The annual cycle is due to the spin of the Earth upon its axis; the precessional cycle is due to the 'wobble' of the Earth's axis. The tropical viewpoint takes account only of the annual cycle and ignores the precessional effect.

Mainstream modern Western astrology uses a system wherein the year is divided up into twelve parts that are named after the twelve signs of the celestial zodiac as they related to the positioning of the Sun on the ecliptic c. 160 BC. ('Zodiac' is a Greek word meaning 'circle of life', the circumference of the circle being the ecliptic.) At this time (c. 160 BC) the position of the Sun was on the cusp of Sagittarius-Capricorn at midwinter and of Gemini-Cancer at midsummer. This position of the Sun in relation to the two solstice festivals of the year then determined how the twelve parts of the year were named, meaning that every midwinter it is said that the Sun is on the cusp of Sagittarius-Capricorn and every midsummer it is on the cusp of Gemini-Cancer. In addition the spring equinox is said to be the cusp of Pisces-Aries and the autumn equinox on the cusp of Virgo-Leo, which actually was never the real position of the Sun in the sky c. 160 BC but which is made to be so in the division of the year into its twelve equal parts or 'signs'.

However, because of the wobble of the Earth's axis, the Sun appears to precess around the ecliptic one degree every 72 years, so that in approximately 2,160 years the position of the Sun at any particular time of the year, such as midsummer or midwinter, will have moved on by a whole zodiac sign. Thus at the moment, in actuality, the midwinter Sun is on the cusp of Sagittarius-Scorpio and the midsummer Sun is on the cusp of Gemini-Taurus in the celestial zodiac.

This makes a considerable difference if one is relating things to the stars and the real zodiacal positions of the Sun, Moon and planets at any time. For instance, right now there is an alignment of the Earth, Sun and centre of the Milky Way Galaxy at the solstices, which only happens once every 26,000 years. This is because the meridian of the Milky Way Galaxy crosses the ecliptic at two points opposite each other on the ecliptic and these two points are assigned to the cusps of Sagittarius-Scorpio and Gemini-Taurus. They are the only two 'fixed' points on the ecliptic and from them the rest of the zodiac is divided into its twelve equal parts or signs, with each of the signs taking its name from the constellation that most closely lies in that sign and is on the ecliptic. Taurus is traditionally said to be the Alpha sign of the zodiac, with the Bull being the symbol of the creative Word being sounded that brings all things into being—hence Taurus is associated with the throat chakra in the human being. When the midsummer sun reaches the Gemini-Taurus cusp, which is pointed at by the finger of Orion, and is about to move into the sign of Taurus, the birth of a new Great Age takes place. Complementing this, the midwinter sun will be on the cusp of Sagittarius-Scorpio and about to move into the sign of Scorpio. This position equates with the Galactic Centre as viewed from the Earth, aligning it, as it were, with midwinter and Christmas; hence the birth of the new Great Age is derived from the heart of the galaxy itself.

Another big difference between the two zodiacs is that in the fixed, out of date one, the four great cherubim associated with the four quarterday festivals are the four fixed signs, Aquarius, Leo, Taurus and Scorpio, defined biblically as a man, lion, bull and eagle. Now, in the real or sidereal zodiac, the cardinal signs, Capricorn, Aries, Cancer and Libra, stand in those positions.

To summarise in a simplistic way, the tropical zodiac is the division of a year, any year, into twelve equal parts and the naming of those parts after the signs of the zodiac as they appeared in relation to the position of the Sun 2,160 years ago. Thus, for example, a person like myself born near the beginning of November is said to be a Sun-sign Scorpio in tropical astrology. In actuality, the Sun was in the sign of Libra when I was born, but I am referred to as a Scorpio Sun-sign person simply because I was born in the first half of November. The use of the names of the signs of the zodiac is no more or less a substitute for the months of the year. The sidereal zodiac, by contrast, concerns things as they actually are at any moment in time in relation to the Sun, Moon, planets, stars and celestial zodiac.

The tropical zodiac is the classical zodiac, which was introduced in the neo-Babylonian period (c. 7th to 6th century BC), before the precession of the Sun was discovered by the classical astronomers. When the precession was eventually discovered (attributed to Hipparchus, a Greek astronomer active in the later Hellenistic period, c. 130 BC), it was decided nevertheless to keep the astrological associations as they were. The Hindu astrologers never did this; their astrology is sidereal and thus far more real, accurate and meaningful.

When it comes to the manifestation of the zodiac archetype in the landscape, for instance, it is 'imprinted' in a fixed way, like a horoscope. That is to say, the landscape map of the zodiac with its twelve signs or divisions remains the same year after year, age after age. But if one were to track the symbolic movement of the Sun through this landscape zodiac, then its location in the landscape at any festival time, for instance, would gradually change as the years pass. Thus, 2,160 years ago, the position of the midwinter Sun in the landscape zodiac of Britain would have coincided with somewhere between Windsor and Winchester, in the Aldershot area of Hampshire. Right now it coincides with London, because the City of London is on the Sagittarius-Scorpio cusp of the British Zodiac.

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