

From time immemorial

As a distinguished builder of the (First) Temple of Jerusalem in 1000 B.C. Hiram Abiff features in several of our Masonic Orders. One Degree suggests that, 'He was slain three thousand years after the creation of the world...'

Hiram's murder was apparently co-incident with completion of the Temple. When our Craft rituals were written around 1730, it was long after the Royal Society had raised searching questions about the age of the Earth. One wonders just why our rituals assumed creation to have been in 4,000 B.C.?

One explanation may stem from the return of Charles II in 1660 when the Established Church, dispossessed by Oliver Cromwell, sought to resume its former intellectual authority. The bishops sternly proclaimed that the world around us could only be fully understood from between the covers of the Bible, and not by any 'scientific delusions' of the Royal Society. A true Christian seeking the precise age of the earth could therefore only start from the one source – Chapter One of the Book of Genesis. Following the seven days of creation, and the fratricidal feuding of Adam's offspring, Genesis (Chapter 5) lists the subsequent family history in remarkable detail. The Gospel according to St Matthew (Chapter 1:1-17) continues the lineage in similar vein. (Apparently an awful lot of begatting went on). By assuming an average mortality for each of these descendants, a working hypothesis of their overall life-span could then be established.

Great minds were needed and where better to find them than, ironically, from within the rejected Royal Society? I suspect still swallowing the indignity hard, its intellectually formidable, but loyally Christian, President, Sir Isaac Newton, calculated the date of Creation as c.4000 BC. Johannes Keppler, of planetary motion fame, refined this to 3992 BC and Caliger, (a respected historian) was even more cautious at 3949 BC. They were all eclipsed in 1656 by the work of Archbishop Ussher of Dublin.

Ussher's chronology represented a considerable feat of scholarship, founded on an admirable depth of knowledge of Persian, Greek and Roman history as well as of the Biblical texts. He also drew on an equally impressive understanding of astronomy, ancient calendars and mathematics. The Archbishop eventually calculated that the Supreme Architect had, so to speak, pressed the button at 9 pm (or just after nightfall) on 23 October 4004 BC. So, Drs Desagulier and Anderson, as Christian Ministers, when writing our Craft Rituals around 1730 would have had persuasive religious arguments for believing that if the Temple had been completed, and our Master murdered, in 1000 B.C. then the event had to be three millennia after the creation of the world. Most scholars had agreed that Christ's Birth was circa 4 BC. (He died in 29 or 30 AD. and had lived for 33 years) Archbishop Ussher therefore concluded that Creation must have occurred not in 4000 but 4004 BC.