



Your Sun Sign Is Still the Same: the Zodiac Signs versus Constellations Issue

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The zodiac signs versus constellation issue that spread like wildfire through the media in the week starting 10 January 2011 is not news to astrologers. But it is interesting how it's suddenly become a hot topic. Perhaps due to social networking, the information has spread further and more quickly than usual when every few years this story breaks.

The main thing to know is that your Sun Sign has not changed. For example, if you always knew you are a Scorpio, you are still a Scorpio.

It's complex to explain the difference between a zodiac sign and a constellation as it's to do with the deeper theorising behind astrology that has been passed down over millennia, from the Babylonians to the Ancient Greeks and so on.

But to try to explain it, a zodiac is a way to measure the 360 degree circle that the planets draw in the sky (an imaginary circle called 'the ecliptic') as they travel around the Sun. There are two predominant ways to conceptualise this cosmic measuring tape (zodiac) - one is largely based on the constellations and called Sidereal Astrology. This astrology is mostly used in Eastern countries like India. The other way is based on the Seasons and how the Sun connects heaven and earth (Autumn & Spring Equinox and Summer & Winter solstice etc). This is Tropical astrology and is mostly used by Western astrologers.

So anyone from a Western culture who's ever had a horoscope done in an Eastern country like India already has had the uncanny experience of being told their Sun Sign is different from what they are accustomed to! Both zodiacs show information about a person's fate and freewill but it seems each zodiac has a different emphasis and that Eastern Astrology tends to be more fate focussed.

By the way, all of astrology is based on the stars. The Sun itself is of course a star. Even though Western astrology does not use the constellations for its zodiac, it still uses the stars through taking into account the 'fixed stars'.

The thing that's fascinating is that both the tropical and sidereal zodiacs give correct results. Some astrologers have been trained in using both over the past few years now that there's more cross-fertilisation between east and west, but most astrologers have been trained in one or the other depending on which culture they're in. Perhaps it's a bit like how there are Western medicine doctors and Chinese medicine doctors. Both systems work, but with different emphases, strengths and weaknesses.

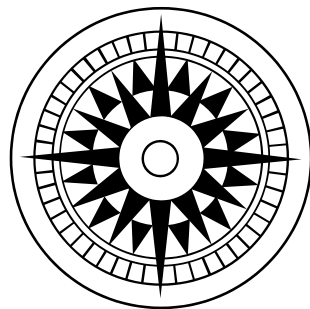
Both sidereal and tropical astrologers divide the 360 degree circle so that there are 12 zodiac signs of 30 degrees each. But when we look at the actual constellations themselves, some are much larger than 30 degrees and some are much smaller. Before the 12 signs were settled on, there was disagreement about which constellations along the ecliptic should be included as zodiac signs. At some stage 18 were in use. The 12 we use today were decided upon around the time of the Ancient Greeks.

The constellations and zodiac signs used to align, but over millennia, due to a phenomenon called the precession of the equinoxes (which creates the Great Ages of Pisces, Aquarius etc) they are now practically one zodiac sign apart (from a tropical western astrologer's point of view). So, the tropical zodiac sign Scorpio is no longer lined up with the constellation Scorpio. It is lined up with Libra. Over the next centuries, the signs and constellations will slide into being two zodiac signs apart. Over the course of 26,000 years every tropical sign will have moved through every constellation once.

Unfortunately the constellations and zodiac signs have the same official names, which creates a lot of confusion. To help avoid this confusion some astrologers call the constellations by their symbolic image. So if we think of the constellation as 'The Scorpion' and the zodiac sign as 'Scorpio', we can distinguish the two. Or we can distinguish the constellation The Ram from the zodiac sign Aries; The Bull from Taurus; The Twins from Gemini; and so on.

It's interesting that right now, at the start of 2011, it has caught the public imagination that there's a possible 13th sign Ophiuchus (near The Scorpion and The Archer). To be correct, Ophiuchus is a constellation not a sign. You probably get the idea by now that the zodiac signs are different from the constellations, even in sidereal astrology. Perhaps in the future astrologers might change history and make this constellation a sign (in the same way there was enough agreement among astronomers recently to decide Pluto is not a planet) but it seems unlikely because of the perfect symmetry and mathematical geometry of the number 12 that most astrology is based on when charts are drawn up.

But let's imagine it is agreed that Ophiuchus should be a 13th sign, then it probably also should be agreed that other constellations that are closely connected to the ecliptic become signs too; for example, Cetus the Whale (near The Ram and The Fish). But how interesting that in these 'change times' when everything feels weird, spooky or magical (number 13) that this issue has come up. It's especially interesting because of what Ophiuchus represents - behind the constellation Ophiuchus is the mythology of the master healer Asclepius and we certainly live in times when humanity would benefit from focussing more attention on personal and global healing.



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