

# **Abjad: the Numerological Language of Spiritual Insight and Guidance as Employed in Sufism**

**Presented on July 8, 2008, by Temenos Academy at the Royal Asiatic Society,  
London**

**by Robert Abdul Hayy Darr**

If religious belief requires that we relax our faculties of rational, critical thinking, mysticism demands that we “tear down the very structures of reason,” to quote the great poet Sa’di. If religion permits us to worship God, mysticism allows us to directly experience that vast and loving Divine Presence. According to mystics like Rumi, we must learn to de-activate our familiar faculties of thought and feeling, not just their contents, if we are to experience this inner connection to God. This process called the ‘mystical quest’, the ‘journey home’, ‘enlightenment’, and many other names besides, necessarily takes us into an unfamiliar realm of personal and transpersonal experience. In this spiritual realm, everything that we thought was true and meaningful is reduced or dissolves before us, and our very sense of ourselves, our identity, fades away. Rumi writes that this is like coming to the ocean after having journeyed a lifetime on the land. This unexpected experience of suddenly being on the sea can certainly feel strange and disorienting. We might react to it with reluctance and fear, like Noah’s son. He fled towards the high mountain as the waters rose up around him. Noah implored him to come into the safety of the Ark, but his son would not abandon what he knew and had always relied upon, which was the safety of the land. We too have spent most of our lives walking on firm land. We tremble at the thought of giving ourselves over to the unknown waters, giving up our usual mental and emotional lives. This would be to give up our very identity, to die as it were. And this ‘dying’ of the ego is the stated aim of Islamic mysticism. The Prophet Muhammad said, “Die before you die.” Die, in other words, to your ongoing illusion of having of a real and separate self, since when you physically pass away, you’ll die to your illusory self-existence in any case.

Sufi teaching, including the use of numerology, is only helpful, however, if it truly enables us to transcend the illusion of individual separateness, because it is this illusion which prevents us from realizing our true, divine origins. Interest in esoteric teachings can be hazardous to genuine spiritual study if people turn to them craving personal power or special knowledge that others do not have. This kind of fascination with esoteric terminology only reinforces egocentricity. We must bear this hazard in mind if we are to correctly approach esoteric teachings like numerology.

Spiritual aspirants spend many years, usually under the tutelage of an experienced guide, engaged in contemplative and meditative practices. These practices are designed to expand our range of experience beyond the more restricted processes of rational thinking and emotional self-preoccupation. The latter are silenced in a number of ways. Central to Sufi practice are the worship of God and the service of humanity. Devotional worship, and special spiritual practices for temporarily suspending the usual sensory and mental experiences, deconstruct the self-referential mindset that restricts our experience of True

Reality. Over time, these approaches lead to a fundamental shift in the psyche. The soul expands as self-preoccupation diminishes. The soul discovers intimacy with an oceanic spiritual awareness through which it becomes conscious of the symbolic nature of things and events. As spiritual aspirants lose the usual bearings of the shore they must, to quote Rumi, find safety in the company of a guide, “the Noah of the time,” and travel in the ark of the Sufi Tradition. The stored provisions for this journey include the Book of Revelation, and the literature and art produced by generations of mystic seafarers.

Symbolism is used by Sufis to evoke an awareness of the Eternal. Sufi poetry and teaching stories are layered with evocative symbols that inform and awaken different levels of our being. Beyond the narrative, there are deeper levels of symbolism presented through literary devices such as double-entendre, root-word resonance and numerology. The Islamic world was heir to the alphabetical numerology already used for centuries throughout the Near East. In this system, each letter of the alphabet also represents a number. A system of alphabetical numbering of things was the common practice in Arabia prior to the introduction of Indian numerals. We now call them Arabic numerals, but they were not commonly used in Arabia prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Alphabetical numbers were used instead. Arabs were raised reading letters as numbers and would, as a matter of course, see words simultaneously as a collection of numbers. Numbers had to be colored or overlined to distinguish them from words. Given these facts, it is easy to imagine the development of a sophisticated usage of alphabetical numerology in Arabic. Here is the main Islamic version of this system.

<i>Abjad</i>	<i>hawaz</i>	<i>hutty</i>	<i>kaliman</i>	<i>sa'afas</i>	<i>qarashat</i>
1,2,3,4,	5,6,7	8,9,10	20,30,40,50	60,70,80,90	100,200,300,400
<i>thakhadh</i>	<i>dazagh.</i>				
500,600,700	800,900,1000				

Muslims might have first applied abjad while trying to understand certain mysterious letters at the beginning of some of the chapters of the Qur'an, letters whose existence and purpose has never definitively been explained. As they began to use abjad as a tool to study the verses of the Qur'an, they noticed numerological correspondences between some of the Divine Names, the various aspects of God. This was sufficient proof, for many, that numerology was inherent in the revelation. For example, lists of the ninety-nine Names of Allah, usually begin with *ar-Rahman*, the Merciful, and end with *as-Sabur*, the Patient. These each have the same abjad of 329. Another example is the Loving, *al-Wadud*, and the Guide, *al-Hadi*, both have an abjad number of 51. It is not difficult to grasp the conceptual link between two Divine Names with identical numerology but those who intellectually grasped this, rarely considered it to be of any great significance. For the mystic, on the other hand, whose intellectual powers have auspiciously faded in the bright light of internal revelation, these connections resonate more deeply. The mystic also encounters mystical symbols with the mind. But the mystic's mind has undergone a perceptual shift such that his or her awareness of the underlying Source of Being outshines the usual thinking processes. The mystic experiences a profound recognition of the existential reference of any given symbol,

beyond the mere intellectual understanding of its numerological relationship to the idea it represents. Having left the familiar, safe shore of ego-identification, the awe-struck seeker journeys across the spiritual ocean in a state of existential perplexity. This perplexity is the natural outcome of exploding the myth of a fixed sense of self. In the vast, unspeakable beauty of this night of perplexity, the mystic apprehends symbolic meanings of various kinds which illuminate his or her consciousness like moonlight. Spiritual meanings, whether appearing in the guise of visionary images or of sublime ideas, expand the soul's awareness of its own reflected luminosity.

Another example of numerology involves the name of Allah, the name of God that is inclusive of divine transcendence and immanence. Allah has an abjad of 66. Since the name Allah is considered inclusive of all of the 99 Names of God, mystics have found significance in the fact that 66 and 99 add up to the abjad number of the Islamic testimony of the faith, *La ilaha illa Allah*, which has an abjad number of 165. They found further significance in the fact that 165 is also the number for the Divine Name, *as-Samad*, the Eternal Sustainer. This kind of metaphysical relationship might, for a novice in this study, reveal itself only through a systematic numerological analysis of terms and ideas. With more familiarity, the numerology of a word or phrase might be immediately evident, and numerological teachings can even occur in dreams and meditative visions. Either way, the mystic soul discovers meanings like the one I've just indicated for the number 165. In that example of the Eternal Sustainer, 165 becomes the sign or the icon of an intimate, present God, the One who sustains His creation and communicates lovingly with it through His Divine Names.

Abjad is part of a great alphabetical science called the 'Science of Letters', the *'ilm al-huruf*. This science concerns itself not only with the numerological aspect of letters but also with the study of the shapes of letters and their cosmological significance. The letter *alef*, for example, is not only shaped like the number one but *is* the number 'one' in abjad. It is the original letter and represents the principle of unitary Being. The other letters of the alphabet are said to have evolved from the letter *alef* into the variety and multiplicity of the alphabet which for the *hurufis* represents the cosmos. Sufis and Muslim esotericists wrote complex treatises on the Science of Letters, drawing upon letter-symbolism found in the Qur'an to support their various hypotheses. These sometimes quite popular theories have for centuries attracted seekers of hidden meanings that were believed to exist in the Qur'an. There are even contemporary teachings that still use this approach, such as the late Dr. Khalifa's numerological study of the Qur'an which revealed a repeating pattern of 19, the abjad number for the concept of unity in the Divine Name, *Wahed*. The weight of the evidence for the existence of numerology in the Qur'an is sufficient to convince even a skeptic that there is a numerological pattern at work in the scripture. The Sufi is interested in how to make use of such a discovery beyond a mere fascination with the mysterious. Sufi poets and writers used numerology to enrich their already potent mystical literature. Numerology is not at all a *necessary* part of Sufi teaching, but it can be found embedded in mystical literature as another layer of instruction. It exists to enhance our understanding of the overt spiritual message. This enrichment of spiritual literature may allow us to integrate the message more fully, more deeply than our usual intellectual processing of information.

As already pointed out, Sufis use symbolism to evoke and revive our forgotten awareness of the Eternal. In order to better understand how abjad symbolism is employed in Sufi literature, let us now take an example from the life of Jesus. The story of the annunciation as presented in the Qur'an and expanded in Sufi literature describes the Virgin Mary bathing when she is approached by the Angel Gabriel. In the Qur'an, Gabriel is called a spirit [*ruh*] and a divine messenger [*rasul*]. He appears to Mary as a 'well-formed' man. Mary, in her state of ascetic purity, projects a psychological shadow on the figure of Gabriel by imagining that he wants to lie with her sexually. Gabriel assures her that he is only there to bring her the good news of a pure boy who will be the messenger of God.

One excellent Sufi commentary on the Qur'anic account of Jesus is Ibn 'Arabi's chapter on the Wisdom of Jesus in his *Fusus al-Hikam*, the *Bezels of Wisdom*. The Shaykh calls this the *Wisdom of Prophecy*. Prophets usually bring textual revelations to their communities. In this case the prophetic message is Jesus himself who, as *Ruhullah*, the Spirit of Allah, will directly manifest the spiritual reality of prophecy. Perhaps the best translation for the Arabic root word of prophecy, *naba*, is the English word, to *inform*, if we take both meanings of 'inform': to give news and to take on form. Going to the numerology surrounding the story of Jesus, we find that Gabriel, *Jibr'il* in Arabic, has an abjad number of 245 which, interestingly enough, is exactly the same as for the word *ar-ruh*, Spirit. As already noted, Gabriel is called a 'messenger' and in this case, his message is the divine Spirit that he blows into Mary. In the Qur'an Jesus is called *Ruhullah*, the Spirit of Allah. Mary is also related to the principle of 'informing' because her own name *Mariam* has an abjad number of 290 which is the same as the Arabic root for the informing message, *rasala*. Ibn 'Arabi's exegesis explains that the reality of prophecy is the reality of 'informing,' of Spirit taking on form. Gabriel is a spirit 'informer' who takes on the form of a 'well-made' man on the occasion of blowing the divine Spirit into Mary. This Spirit is the principle of life itself which is why Jesus can bring the dead back to life and why he can blow the spirit into clay birds which then fly away. In the Qur'an, *Jibr'il* is called the 'trustworthy spirit' *ar-Ruh al-amin*. *Al-Amin*, the Trustworthy, is also a name of the Prophet Muhammad. It has an abjad of 132. This is the abjad number for the word *qalb* which means heart or spiritual consciousness. This is an important abjad number for the Sufis because it is also the abjad for Muhammad, (by counting the doubled *mim*) and for the totality of the essences [*'ayan*] of things that can be witnessed in the purified heart. The purified heart means a heart that is alive through the Spirit which is why it can know and *inform*, that is reveal the theophanies that manifest in it. Jesus [*'Isa*] has an abjad number of 150 which is the same as the number for God's Name, Knowing [*'Alim*]. In the case of Jesus, this refers to a direct spiritual knowing which is only possible for a living heart. By adding the abjad of 'heart,' 132, and Spirit's synonym, the Divine Name, Living, [*Hayy*], 18, we get the same number, 150.

So how does the spiritual aspirant learn from the 'informing' of the story of Jesus? After reading and studying both the Qur'anic account and various presentations of Sufi exegesis on the story, the seeker consciously personalizes the story. Details of the account are closely studied, including the numerological references that provide a more

profound sense of the story's significance. After becoming 'informed' by the story in this way and giving this time to gestate, the aspirant will have received two blessings. The first is an enrichment in understanding, a fundamental broadening of his sense of the mystical experience. He may, secondly, come to realize in what manner the relationships in the story can be applied in order to purify his soul so that it can take on the character of Mary. The wisdom of Mary can be summed up in the teaching that when the soul is purified and restored to its fundamental nature, it is once more receptive to spiritual communication. The soul will be, like Mary, receptive to a spiritual messenger, a Gabriel. It understands that the messenger can appear in an unexpected form bearing its life-giving spirit. If the soul has become too dogmatic or too abstracted from the world, it might, like Mary, reject the form of the spiritual messenger. When the soul relaxes and becomes empty and open, Gabriel will blow God's spirit into it. This life-breath of meaning will grow into a new life, that of a revived 'heart'. By the word 'heart' the Sufi means a special, essential faculty of the soul, one that allows it to witness True Reality directly. According to a well-known *hadith*, the 'heart' is the only thing in all of creation that can encompass Divinity.

To even begin applying the story Jesus, we must first become sensitive to our soul's true condition. This can only occur if we sufficiently transcend our psychological dependence on the outer senses which sustain the illusions of the ego-self. By another way, the way of self-forgetting, we can become like Mary in purification. The only thing that we can bring to this work is a commitment to selflessness through our worship of God. True spirituality manifests only by the grace of God who sends His spirit-messengers to inform and revive our hearts. When Jesus is born within us, the true purpose of our humanity will be realized. Our souls will become gardens and orchards full of fragrance and nourishment.

There is great benefit to studying all of the prophetic stories in the Qur'an in this manner. They each contain fundamental truths about spirituality which can be integrated and remain a source guidance, present in our psyches. One person who studied the story in this comprehensive way later dreamed of eight angels with their arms locked together to form an octagonal platform upon which Jesus stood. The dream's imagery is a further interpretation of the Jesus story we've been studying, and reveals the integrative nature of spiritual intelligence. The dream makes references to a Qur'anic verse that describes eight angels supporting the divine Throne, and also to a *hadith* which states, "The *heart* of the faithful is the Throne of the Merciful." Jesus, as he appears in this dream, represents the Throne which has been identified with the human 'heart' in the *hadith*. It is through this Jesus-heart that the Divine awareness witnesses His creation. Ibn 'Arabi quotes a relevant Qur'anic verse concerning the special witnessing of Jesus, which is the witnessing of God. [V:117]

Here is a relevant poem by Rumi:

## Gabriel

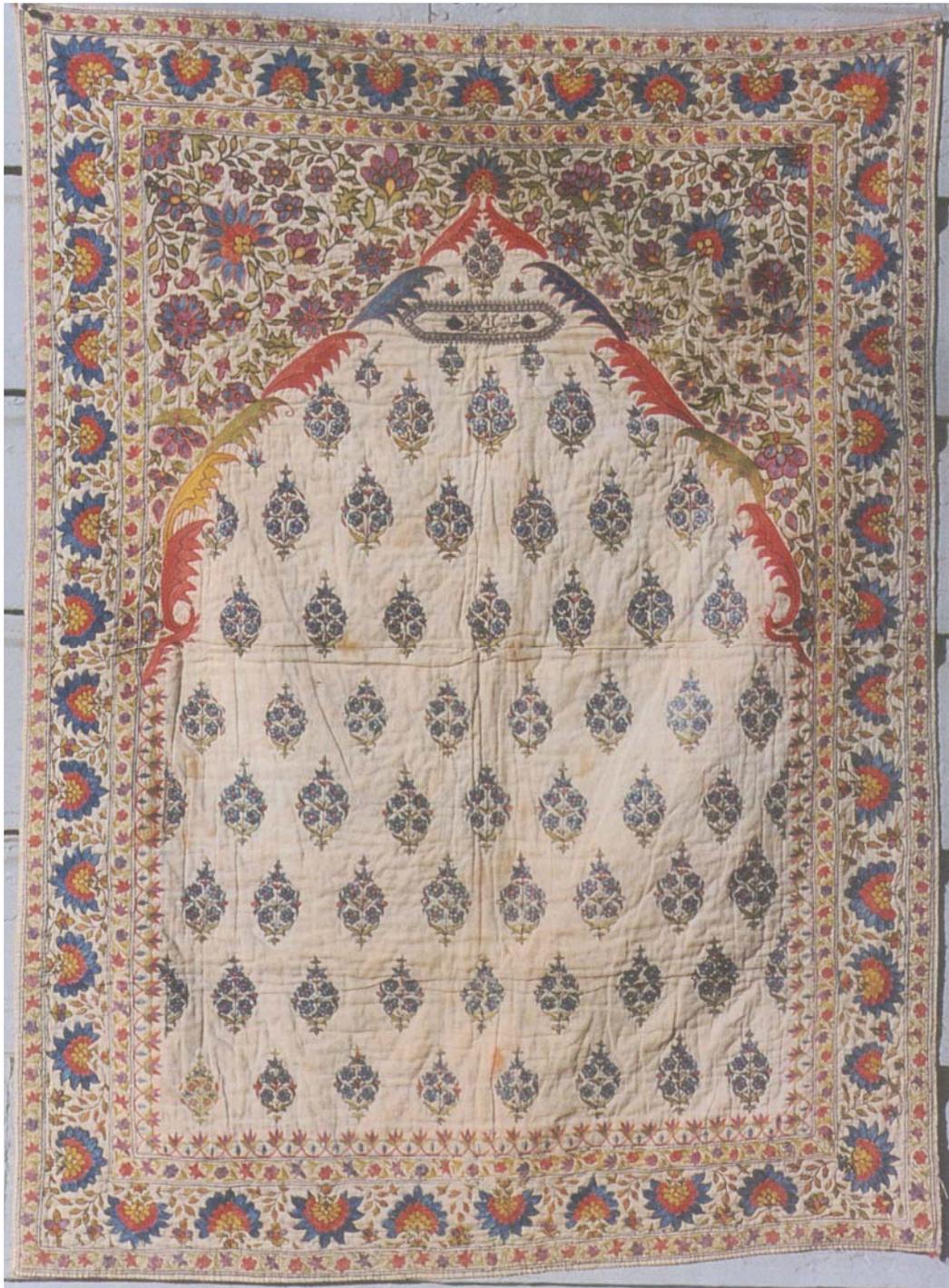
(Mathnawi, Book III, from line 3701)

A life-giving form appeared in Mary's room,  
Oh how soul-expanding, how heart-ravishing!  
That Trusty Spirit, like the moon and sun,  
rose before her from the face of the earth.  
Pure beauty rose up from it unveiled  
like the brilliant, eastern-rising sun.  
A trembling shook Mary's limbs;  
in her nakedness she feared wrongdoing.  
Had Joseph seen such a beauty as this,  
he'd have cut his hands like the women did.  
It emerged from clay like a budding rose,  
a fantasy lifting its head from the heart.  
Mary was beside herself; she ecstatically  
spoke, "I'll go seek refuge in God,"  
since it was pure-hearted Mary's habit  
to pack up and flee the world into the Unseen.  
She'd seen no stronger fortress than God  
so made her encampment below that turret.  
But where is there refuge after looking  
into those mind-scorching glances,  
those arrows piercing the heart?  
Of the beauty that enslaves king and army,  
that leaves witless the sovereigns of wit,  
what can I say since He's sown my lips;  
His furnace has torched my windpipe.  
There's no proof anyway for the sun  
except its own radiance shining above.

Sufi teachers present novices with symbols that will keep them aware and focused on the spiritual journey. The symbols embody the important concepts being used to inform and clarify the inner and outer faculties of the soul. Mystics have made use of all of the arts, and even the crafts, as vehicles for the expression of spiritual symbolism. They have made a conscious use of aesthetics to create special environments that nurture a heightened awareness of God. Abjad numerology has been found in mosques, around tombs, on things like cloaks, urns, tombstones, and in prayer rugs, just to name a few of the venues.

Let us now take a look at an aesthetic use of numerology in a prayer rug from the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some friends of mine who are textile experts were curious about the asymmetry evident in the *mihrab* design and they asked for my opinion about this.

While studying the piece I made the following discoveries. The asymmetry results from eleven leaves or palm fronds of different colors that form the arch of the *mihrab* in the rug.





The borders are particularly interesting. The border of the inner field is a line of sixty-six identical flowers broken by one anomalous sprout. Sixty-six, as you may recall, is the abjad number of Allah. The single sprout would seem to represent the principle of unity. At the spot where the worshipper's head touches the rug during prostration, a sentence has been stitched. The sentence is the liturgical '*subhana rabbi al-'ala*', "Praise to my Lord, most Sublime." The cartouche surrounding this phrase is made up of 130 tiny flowers. This is the abjad number for the word *qul*, the command to 'say.' Now if we gather together the several meanings already discovered, we find the reference to the *Surah al-Ikhlās*, the Surah of Sincerity or Unity which is often called by its first line, *Qul Huwa Llahu Ahad*, "Say that Allah is One." All of these words have numerological symbols within the *mihrab* field upon which the worshipper stands, bows, and prostrates. There are quite a few more abjad meanings in the prayer rug which together with the ones I've already mentioned in the field, convince me that these were conscious choices made by the rug designer. The two perimeter borders contain a total of 329 identical small flowers. You may recall that this is the abjad for both *ar-Rahman* and *as-Sabur*. Within these borders is a wider band that holds fan-shaped flowers. There are three of the same floral shapes at the top of the rug. Together these total 44 which is the abjad number for *al-Ahad*, the One.

The ritual prayer is not only an obligatory practice in Islam, it is considered by many Sufis to be the most intimate expression of the mystical experience. In Ibn 'Arabi's chapter on Muhammad in the *Fusus al-Hikam*, the *Bezels of Wisdom*, we learn a great deal about the meaning of the ritual prayer and the nature of the intimacy possible in prayer. To summarize the Shaykh's teaching, prayer is a shared experience between God and the human worshipper. The worshipper is in fact an aspect of divinity, whether aware of this or not. If the worshipper becomes aware of this, he or she will experience the reality of the Prophet's description of *ihsan*, normally translated as goodness, or virtue. But in that *hadith*, Muhammad says that *ihsan* means that one should worship

God as if he sees God, for even if he does not see God, God sees him. Explicit in the *hadith* is that it is indeed possible to see God if one can transcend *ghaflah*, the heedlessness that bars most human beings from doing so. In another chapter of the *Fusus*, Shu'aib, the Shaykh informs us that this *hadith* alerts us to the fact that this special kind of 'seeing' takes place by "making use of the Imaginal Presence." This Presence is an interworld between pure spirit and our own world of form, a level in which God appears in the guise of any form He wishes. God usually appears in a form suited to the spiritual state of the worshipper. This Sufi doctrine is still applied through the meditative practices of the mystics of Islam.

Could it be that the rich symbolism found in this prayer-rug is intended to more deeply engage the worshipper in prayer by evoking the most fundamental spiritual meanings that are at the heart of prayer? According to the Sufis, true worship can reach an ultimate degree in which the worshipper's identity is effaced. In that state, the one who is seeing God is not other than God.

We've looked at examples of the use of abjad in literature and in a prayer-rug. I have also discovered evidence for the conscious use of abjad in the decoration of special buildings. Let us recall that chronograms were often used on tombstones and even in the naming of such things as gardens like the one that the emperor Babur describes in the *Baburnameh*. I've spent the last few years studying the Alhambra palaces in Spain and I am confident that abjad numerology was used in some of its decorations. I have written about these discoveries in an article entitled "The Palace of Blessing and Grace." An edited version of this article was recently published in *Seasons* magazine and can be found online. I am happy to provide the paper in its entirety to anyone interested.

Let us start by looking at the Alhambra's setting. I imagine that many of you have already visited the Alhambra palaces and you can probably recall how beautiful its surroundings are, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. One of the palaces is now called the Court of Lions, named after the fountain at the center of its courtyard. At either end of the courtyard, east and west of the fountain, are identical pavilions that shelter smaller fountains that drain back towards the base of the central fountain. What is interesting about the pavilions is the interior of their wooden domes. Let's take a look at one of these. You can see that the larger wooden stars that ornament the dome are eleven-pointed. This is a bit surprising, since eleven-pointed stars are more difficult to execute, especially in a dome, than the more common even-numbered stars. Why would the maker create a more difficult design to ornament a small, somewhat concealed dome? Could the designers of the domes have employed numerological symbolism as well? There is great deal of more conventional mystical symbolism to be found throughout the Alhambra palaces, but is there any reason to believe that numerology was also employed? According to the historical records, there was a strong interest in mathematics, mysticism, and numerology during the reigns of Yusuf I and Mohammad V. It was during their reigns that the domes were built. Although we have yet to uncover documentary proof for the use of numerology in the dome's design, we can examine the dome's geometry itself for evidence of this.

You will recall that the number 11 represents the word *Hu*, which literally means He but refers to the Divine Identity Who is the hidden Self all of the beings and forms of existence. Eleven is one of the best-known abjad numbers because of it represents the Divine Self, and for that reason it has frequently been the subject of commentary by mystics. When the number one is reflected in a mirror, ‘one’ together with its reflection create the image of the number eleven. Two individual ones, or unities, are seen in the number eleven which stands for a Divine Identity of two aspects called transcendence and immanence. There is an appearance of multiplicity in the number eleven representing the Divine Identity, but this is illusory, only caused by the conceptual reflection. Another conceptual illusion, according to the Sufis, is the apparent multiplicity in the forms of all things. Here again, multiplicity is described as an appearance only, the reflection of the Sun of Unity upon the limitless waves of the ocean, creating limitless reflected images of the Sun. The one Being is also said to be reflected in the myriad mirrors of created beings. According to this simile, the limitless diversity in the appearances of existence results from the inherent differences in the shapes of the diverse mirrors. The diverse mirrors are said to reflect appropriate characteristics of the Divine Nature in Its Self-manifestation. The latter are known as the Divine Names or Attributes of God. An interesting thing about the number eleven is that some of its multiples represent some of the Divine Names. To give a few examples, the number 44 represents *al-Ahad*, the One, 66 represents Allah, and the number 88 represents *Halim*, the Gentle.

Looking now at the geometry of one of the dome’s eleven-pointed stars, we can see flowers within it, four in each of the eleven hexagons. If we add all of the flowers of each star, we get the 44 for the name, *al-Ahad*, the One. If we add all of the sides of the eleven hexagons, we get 66, the abjad number for Allah. If instead, we add not only those sides, but the 22 lines that make up the center star, we come up with 88 which is the number for *Halim*, the Gentle.

There are a total of twelve eleven-pointed starts in the dome, and these are arranged in



three descending, circular rows of four. You can see that through simple multiplication of each row of four times eleven, we again come up with the abjad number for *al-Ahad*, the One, in each descending row. The total star-points in the dome is 11 times 12 which gives us 132, that important number I mentioned earlier which is the abjad number of the 'heart', and also of several other very important ideas which were the subject of study at this time period in Muslim Spain. It is simultaneously the abjad number for Islam, and for Muhammad (by uncharacteristically counting the doubled 'm'), and also for the 'entities' that the world and the heart contain. These entities are called the '*ayan*, which can also be translated as essences, or as 'individual things'.

In summary, let me repeat something I said earlier, to explain the transformative role of abjad numerology in Islamic mysticism. The dervish seeker, like everyone, encounters mystical symbols with the mind. But the mystic seeker's mind has undergone a perceptual shift such that his or her awareness of the underlying Source of Being outshines the usual thinking processes. The seeker experiences a profound recognition of the existential reference of any given symbol, beyond the mere intellectual understanding of its numerological relationship to the idea it represents. Having left the familiar, safe shore of ego-identification, the awe-struck seeker journeys across the spiritual ocean in a state of existential perplexity. This perplexity is the natural outcome of exploding the myth of a fixed sense of self. In the vast, unspeakable beauty of this night of perplexity, the mystic apprehends symbolic meanings of various kinds which illuminate his or her consciousness like moonlight. Spiritual meanings, whether appearing in the guise of visionary images or of sublime ideas, expand the soul's awareness of its own reflected luminosity.