

The Symbolism of the Letters of the Alphabet

(from *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*)

The Shaykh mentions, as we have seen, the reeds of which a mat is woven as symbols of the Manifestations of the Divine Qualities out of which the whole universe is woven. We find a somewhat analogous but more complex symbolism in his little treatise *The Book of the Unique Archetype (Al-Unmūdhaj al-Farīd)* which signalleth the way unto the full realization of Oneness in considering what is meant by the envelopment of the Heavenly Scriptures in the Point of the Basmalah.¹

He begins by quoting two sayings of the Prophet:

“All that is in the revealed Books is in the Qur’ān, and all that is in the Qur’ān is in the *Fātiḥah*,² and all that is in the *Fātiḥah* is in *Bismi ’Llāhi ’l-Raḥmāni ’l-Raḥīm*’ and ‘All that is in *Bismi ’Llāhi ’l-Raḥmāni ’l-Raḥīm* is in the letter *Bā*’, which itself is contained in the point that is beneath it.”³

“This Tradition⁴ hath been bandied about from pen to pen, and sounded in the ears of the elect and generality, so that one and all they endeavour to probe its hidden mysteries. Nor had I the strength to stand aloof from the throng, which had fired the spirit of emulation within me, so I rose to my feet and groped for a snatch of some of its fragrance. My hands fell on the perfume at its very source, and I brought it out from among the hillocks of the dunes, and came with it before the wisest of the learned. They received it with all honour and magnification, and each one said: *This is none other than a noble Angel*.⁵ I said: ‘Indeed, it is above my station. It is the throw of a stone without a thrower.’ Then the tongue of my state answered, and said: *Thou threwest not when thou threwest, but it was God that threw*.⁶

“Whenever, in this treatise, I mention one of the names of ‘other than God’, that is on account of the needs of expression. So let not thine imagination conceive ‘the other’ as being truly other, for then wouldst thou miss the good I am seeking to show thee. For

1. The formula *Bismi ’Llāhi ’l-Raḥmāni ’l-Raḥīm* (literally “In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the Merciful”) with which the Qur’ān opens. Its “point” is the dot under the letter *Bā*’.

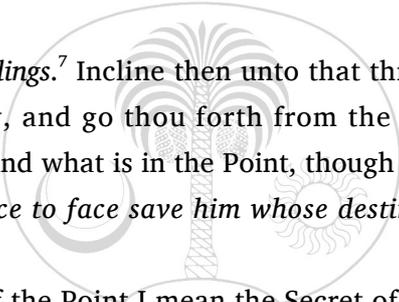
2. The first chapter of the Qur’ān (literally “the Opening”).

3. These Traditions are quoted by ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī at the beginning of his commentary on them, *Al-Kahf wa ’l-Raqīm*, which was almost certainly the starting point of the Shaykh’s treatise.

4. Presumably he is referring to both Traditions. In the Arabic this preamble is in rhymed prose, from which the Shaykh is seldom far away in any of his writings.

5. Said by the women of Egypt (Qur’ān, XII, 31) with reference to Joseph.

6. In the Qur’ān (VIII, 17) these words are addressed to Muḥammad with reference to his throwing a handful of gravel at the enemy during the Battle of Badr, an act which changed the tide of the battle in favour of the Muslims, who completely defeated a Meccan army three times as large as theirs. This was the first battle of Islam, AD 624.



verily we bring thee *great tidings*.⁷ Incline then unto that through which thou mayest be o'erwhelmed in the Reality, and go thou forth from the relative unto the Absolute. Perchance thou wilt understand what is in the Point, though *none understandeth it save the wise*⁸ and *none meeteth it face to face save him whose destined portion is immeasurably blessed*...⁹

“Whenever I speak of the Point I mean the Secret of the Essence which is named the Oneness of Perception (*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*), and whenever I speak of the *Alif* I mean the One Who Alone is (*Wāḥid al-Wujūd*),¹⁰ the Essence Dominical, and whenever I speak of the *Bā'* I mean the ultimate¹¹ Manifestation which is termed the Supreme Spirit, after which come the rest of the letters, then single words, then speech in general, all in hierarchy. But the pivot of this book turneth upon the first letters of the alphabet on account of their precedence over the others. *The Foremost are the Foremost, it is they who are brought nigh*.¹² These are *Alif* and *Bā'*, and they hold in the Alphabet the place that is held by the *Basmalah* in the Qur'ān, for together they make up *Ab*¹³ which is one of the Divine Names. By it would Jesus speak unto His Lord, and he used it when he said: ‘Verily I go unto my Father and your Father,’ that is, unto my Lord and your Lord. And now, if thou understandest that these two letters have a meaning that thou knewest not, be not amazed at what we shall say of the Point, and the rest of the letters.

“The Point was in its hidden-treasurehood¹⁴ before its manifestation of itself as *Alif*, and the letters were obliterate in its secret essence until it manifested the inward outwardly, revealing what had been veiled from sight by donning the various forms of the visible letters; but if thou graspest the truth, thou wilt find naught there but the ink itself, which is what is meant by the Point,¹⁵ even as one of us hath said:

7. XXXVIII, 67.

8. XXIX, 43.

9. XLI, 35.

10. It is here that he diverges from Jīlī, in whose treatise the Point stands for the Divinity in All Its Aspects, whereas the *Alif* is the Spirit of Muḥammad (Jīlī quotes the Tradition: “God created the Spirit of the Prophet from His Essence, and from that Spirit He created the entire Universe”) that is, the Supreme Spirit, which for the Shaykh is symbolized by the *Bā'*. But beneath this divergence the doctrine remains the same.

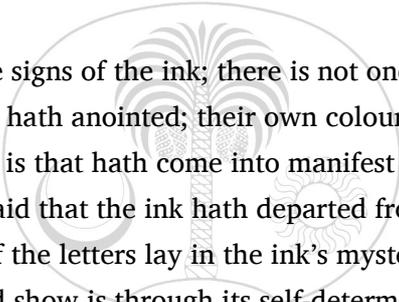
11. Ultimate, because this Spirit, which is none other than “Universal Man”, contains the whole Universe.

12. Qur'ān, LVI, 10–1.

13. Father. It may be noted here incidentally how close the *Basmalah* is in reality to the *In Nomine*. The relationship between the two Names of Mercy in Islam, of which the second only is both Divine and human, is comparable to the relationship between the first two Persons of the Christian Trinity, while the Mercy Itself which is implied in the *Basmalah*, being from both *Al-Raḥmān* and *Al-Raḥīm*, that is, “proceeding from the Father and the Son”, is none other than the Holy Ghost.

14. Referring to the Holy Tradition: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I wished to be known; and so I created the world.”

15. The point and the ink are interchangeable as symbols in that writing is made up of a series of points



The letters are the signs of the ink; there is not one,
 Save what the ink hath anointed; their own colour is pure illusion.
 The *ink's* colour it is that hath come into manifest being.
 Yet it cannot be said that the ink hath departed from what it was.
 The inwardness of the letters lay in the ink's mystery,
 And their outward show is through its self-determination.
 They are its determinations, its activities,
 And naught is there but it. Understand thou the parable!
 They are not it; say not, say not that they are it!
 To say so were wrong, and to say 'it is they' were raving madness.
 For it was before the letters, when no letter was;
 And it remaineth, when no letter at all shall be.
 Look well at each letter: thou seest it hath already perished
 But for the face of the ink, that is, for the Face of His Essence,
 Unto Whom All Glory and Majesty and Exaltation!
 Even thus the letters, for all their outward show, are hidden,
 Being overwhelmed by the ink, since their show is none other than its.
 The letter addeth naught to the ink, and taketh naught from it,
 But revealeth its integrality in various modes,
 Without changing the ink. Do ink and letter together make two?
 Realize then the truth of my words: no being is there
 Save that of the ink, for him whose understanding is sound;
 And wheresoe'er be the letter, there with it is always its ink.
 Open thine intellect unto these parables and heed them!¹⁶

"If thou hast understood how all the letters are engulfed in the Point, then wilt thou understand how all the books are engulfed in the sentence, the sentence in the word, the word in the letter, for we can say with truth: no letter, no word, and no word, no book. The word hath indeed no existence save through the existence of the letter. Analytical differentiation proceedeth from synthetic integration, and all is integrated in the Oneness of Perception which is symbolized by the Point. This is *the Mother* of every book. *God effaceth and confirmeth what He will, and with Him is the Mother of the Book.*¹⁷

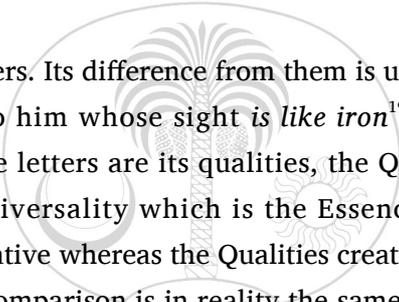
"The Point is essentially different from the letters. *There is naught like unto Him and He is the Hearer, the Seer.*¹⁸ Even so the Point, unlike the other signs, is not subject to the limitation of being defined. It transcendeth all that is to be found in the letters by way of length and shortness and protuberance, so that the sense cannot grasp it either visually or

of ink.

16. 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nābulusi, *Dīwān al-ḥaqā'iq*, p. 435 (Cairo, 1889).

17. Qur'ān, XIII, 39.

18. XLII, 11.



aurally as it graspeth the letters. Its difference from them is understood, but its presence in them is unknown save unto him whose sight is like iron¹⁹ or who giveth ear with full intelligence,²⁰ for although the letters are its qualities, the Quality encompasseth not the Essence, not having the universality which is the Essence's own. The Essence hath incomparability as Its prerogative whereas the Qualities create comparisons.

“And yet to make a comparison is in reality the same as affirming incomparability by reason of the oneness of the ink, for though the letters are comparable each to other, this comparability doth not belie the incomparability of the ink in itself, neither doth it belie the oneness of the ink which is to be found in each letter. Here lieth the ultimate identity between striking comparisons and denying the possibility of comparison, for wherever there be any question of comparison, it is always in reality the ink itself which is compared with itself. *He it is who is God in Heaven and God on earth.*²¹ Howsoever and wheresoever He be, He is God, so let not that which thou seest of Him in the earth of comparability prevent thee from conceiving of Him as He is in the Heaven of incomparability, for all things are made of both incomparability and comparability. *Wheresoe'er ye turn, there is the Face of God.* This is in virtue of the general Attribute which overfloweth from the Infinite Riches of the Point on to the utter poverty of the letters. But as to that which belongeth unto the Point's Own Mysterious Essence, it is not possible that it should undergo the least manifestation in the letters, nor can any letter, either in its form or its meaning, carry the burden of the Point's innermost characteristics.

“Seest thou not that if thou tracest some of the letters of the alphabet, as for example: ب ت ث thou wilt find for each letter another letter that resembleth it: ت is like ب, for example, and ث is like ت. Then if thou wishest to pronounce one of these letters, thou wilt find a sound that fitteth it exactly, whereas the Point hath no exteriorization that so fitteth it. If thou seekest to utter its truth, thou sayest *nuqtatun*, and this utterance will force thee to submit unto letters which have nothing to do with the essence of the point—*nūn, qāf, ṭā'* and *tā'*. It is clear, then, that the Point eludeth the grasp of words. Even so is there no word that can express the Secret Essence of the Creator. Therefore whenever the Gnostic seeketh to denote the Divine incomparability in words, that is, when he seeketh to convey what is meant by the Plenitude of the Essence with all Its Attributes, there cometh forth from his mouth an utterance which goeth far wide of its mark by reason of the limitations of language.

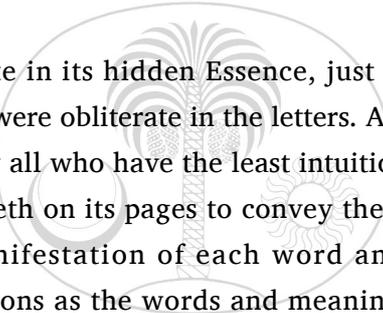
“The Point was in its principial state of utterly impenetrable secrecy²² where there is neither separation nor union, neither after nor before, neither breadth nor length, and

19. An echo of L, 22.

20. L, 37.

21. Qur'ān, XLIII, 84.

22. 'Amā, literally “blindness”, with reference to the blindness of “other” than It, inasmuch as It is pure, unshared Perception (*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*).



all the letters were obliterate in its hidden Essence, just as all the books, despite the divergence of their contents, were obliterate in the letters. As to this reduction of books to letters, it can be perceived by all who have the least intuition. Examine a book, and thou wilt find that naught appeareth on its pages to convey their sense but the twenty-eight letters,²³ which in their manifestation of each word and meaning will be forever reassembling in new formations as the words and meanings vary, until God *inherit the earth and all who are on it*²⁴ and *all things come unto God*.²⁵ Then will the letters return unto their principial centre where nothing is save the Essence of the Point.

“The Point was in its impenetrable secrecy with the letters all obliterate in its Essence, while the tongue of each letter petitioned the length, shortness, depth or other qualities that its truth required. Thus the promptings unto utterance were set in motion according to the demands of the Point’s attributes which lay hidden in its Essence. Then was determined the first manifestation.

The Point’s first manifestation, its first definable appearance, was in the *Alif*, which came into being in the form of incomparability rather than of comparability, so that it might exist qualitatively in every letter while remaining essentially aloof from them. Moreover, thou shouldst know that the appearance of the *Alif* from the Point was not caused, but the Point overflowed with it. Thus was the primal *Alif* not traced by the pen,²⁶ nor was it dependent upon it, but sprung from the outward urge of the Point in its principial centre. Whenever there streamed from it an overflow, there was *Alif*, naught else. It dependeth not upon the pen for its existence, nor needeth it any help therefrom in virtue of its straightness and its transcending all that is to be found in the other letters by way of crookedness or protuberance or other particularity. *He is not questioned as to what He doth, but they are questioned*.²⁷ As to the other letters, they need the movement of the pen upon them, nor could any of them have appearance except by means of it, on account of their concavity, roundness, and whatever else characterizeth them.

“It is true that the *Alif* also may be made to appear by means of the pen, while yet remaining independent of it and without any disparagement to the transcendence of its station, inasmuch as the pen hath its length and straightness from the *Alif*, nay, it is the

23. It must be remembered that the purpose of a mystical treatise is always eminently “practical”, and the practical purpose of this one is in fact indicated in its title (see p. 1). The Shaykh is here inviting his disciples to transpose this operation to the book of Nature in such a way as to see there the “letters” rather than the “words”.

24. Qur’ān, XIX, 40.

25. XLII, 53.

26. The pen symbolizes the Supreme Pen after which Sūrah LXVIII of the Qur’ān is named. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī (*Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, ch. 47), says: “The Prophet said: ‘The first thing which God created was the Intellect’ and he also said: ‘The first thing which God created was the Pen.’ Thus the Pen is the first Intellect, and they are two aspects of the Spirit of Muḥammad.”

27. Qur’ān, XXI, 23.

Alif, whose penned appearance is thus through itself for itself.

“The *Alif* is a symbol of the One who Alone is, of Him whose Being no being precedeth. Thus the appearance of the Point as *Alif* is what is called ‘Firstness’. Before its manifestation it was not so qualified, even as it was not qualified by ‘Lastness’. *He is the First and the Last and the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden.*

If the unique Firstness of the *Alif* be confirmed,²⁸ then of necessity must Lastness also be reserved for it alone.²⁹ Thus doth it declare unto the other letters *Unto Me is your return*,³⁰ one and all. Yea, *unto God come all things.*

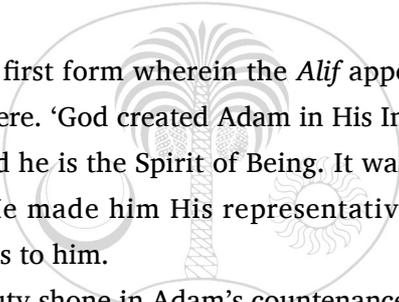
As to the Outward Manifestation of *Alif* in the letters, it is easily perceived. Consider the question well, and thou wilt find that there is no letter whose extension in space is not derived from the *Alif*: the *Hā’* for example is nothing other than a hunchbacked *Alif*, whereas the *Mīm* is a circular *Alif*, and such is the manifestation of the *Alif* according to the dictates of its wisdom, in all the letters, but *the sight attaineth not unto Him*, and this is the meaning of the Inward Hiddenness, for it is clear that no one can perceive the existence of the *Alif* in the circle of the *Mīm* except after much practise, and naught hindereth us from perceiving it but its roundness, that is, its manifestation in a quality that we do not recognize. It itself is the veil over itself...

“The Outward Manifestation of the Truth may be stronger in some visible forms than in others, and this is not difficult to see for him who looketh. Canst thou not detect the *Alif* in some letters as not in others? Not far from its form is the form of the *Lām*, for example; and there is in the *Bā’* of the *Basmalah* that which revealeth the manifestation of the *Alif* therein. But few are they who can easily detect it in the other letters. As to the generality, they are ignorant of the rank of the *Alif*; some know it in its Firstness and are ignorant of it in its Lastness, and there are some who know it in both; but whoso knoweth it not in every letter, small and large, long and short, early in the alphabet and late, verily he seeth not aright, and his perception faileth. If thou hast understood that the *Alif* is manifest in every letter, tell me whether this causeth it to fall short of the dignity of its incomparability wherein it retaineth ever that which belongeth unto it alone. Nay, the essential truth of the *Alif* remaineth as it is, and I see no short-coming on account of its manifestation, which I see rather as one of its perfections. The short-coming—though God knoweth best—is in him who would confine it to one quality, not allowing it to reach out unto another, but constraining it, limiting it, refusing to know it, and reducing it to comparability by making of it a thing like other things. The truth of the knowledge which befitteeth its station is that thou shouldst see the *Alif* manifest in every word of every book. All is *Alif*...

28. “The *Alif*, unlike all other letters, is only one degree distant from the Point, for two points together make an alif” (*Jilī, Al-Kahf wa l-Raqīm*, p. 7).

29. In the inverse process of reintegration.

30. Qur’ān, XXXI, 15.



“The letter *Bā’* is the first form wherein the *Alif* appeared, and thus it manifested itself therein as never elsewhere. ‘God created Adam in His Image’;³¹ and by Adam it is the First Man³² who is meant, and he is the Spirit of Being. It was in virtue of his having been created in His Image that He made him His representative on earth, and ordered the Angels to prostrate themselves to him.

“Had not His Beauty shone in Adam’s countenance,

The Angels never had bowed down prostrate before him.”³³

Was their prostration to other than Him? Nay, God pardoneth not him who is guilty of idolatry.

“The *Bā’* of the *Basmalah* differeth from the ordinary *Bā’* both in form as in function. *Verily thou art of a tremendous nature*;³⁴ and its greatness is none other than the greatness of the *Alif*. *Whoso obeyeth the Apostle obeyeth God*.³⁵ Seest thou not that elsewhere the *Bā’* is not lengthened, whereas in the *Basmalah* it is lengthened, and its length is none other than the elided *Alif*. *Bism* (بسم) was originally *bi-ism* (باسم), and then the *Alif* in *ism*³⁶ left its place vacant and appeared in the *Bā’*, which thus took on the form of the *Alif*, just as it fulfilled the function of the *Alif*. Even so did the Prophet say: ‘I have a time wherein only my Lord sufficeth to contain me’, and thou seest that the *Bā’* hath a time, namely in the *Basmalah*, wherein only the *Alif* sufficeth to contain it, both in its form and in its Point,³⁷ albeit the Point of the *Alif* is above it, whereas the Point of the *Bā’* is beneath it. Indeed the *Alif* is none other than the Point itself which is an eye that wept or a drop that gushed forth and which in its downpour was named *Alif*, without any detriment unto itself in virtue of the Integrity of the *Alif* and its flawless Transcendence wherein the Point remaineth in its Eternal Incomparability. *Verily we stand over them Irresistible*.³⁸ Full descent only took place at the manifestation of *Alif* as *Bā’*, followed by the other letters. If its form had been identical with that of the *Alif*, the *Bā’* would have lost its distinctive characteristics. But the *Bā’* is *Bā’* and the *Alif* is *Alif*: the *Alif* was manifested spontaneously, of its own free will, whereas manifestation was forced upon the *Bā’*. Hence the necessity of the difference between its form and that of the *Alif*, lest we should deny

31. Bukhārī, *Isti’dhān*, 1; and most other canonical books of Traditions.

32. If God created the human being in His Image, He created a priori in His Image man’s spiritual prototype, Universal Man, here called “the First Man”, who was the first created thing, This prototype is what the *Bā’* represents; it is only remotely, and by extension, that *Bā’* can be said to represent Adam in the sense of earthly man, who was the final outcome of creation.

33. Jilī, *‘Ainiyyat*.

34. Qur’ān, LXVIII, 4 (addressed to Muḥammad).

35. Qur’ān, IV, 80.

36. An initial vowel is always written with *alif*.

37. In many manuscripts of the Qur’ān the *hamzah* on an initial *alif* is indicated by a large dot.

38. Qur’ān, VII, 127.

the latency of *Alif* in the other letters,³⁹ or lest we should think that freedom is altogether incompatible with obligation.⁴⁰

“Moreover the Point, which is above the *Alif*, is beneath the *Bā’*, so let this be for us an illustration of the truth that the things of the lower worlds are manifestations of the Point even as are the things of the higher worlds, nor let the manifestation of the Point in the Essence prevent our recognition of it in the Qualities. The Prophet said: ‘If ye lowered a man by a rope unto the nethermost earth, ye would light upon God.’⁴¹ Even so doth the Point beneath the *Bā’* signify the effacement that underlieth all things. *Everything perisheth but his Face. He it is who is God in Heaven and God on earth.* The Point’s being above the *Alif* instructeth us that the *Alif* is its state of manifestation; but the *Bā’* is its veil, and therefore doth it lie beneath the *Bā’*, like the hidden treasure beneath the wall that Al-Khidr feared would collapse.⁴²

“When *Bā’* understood its true relation unto *Alif*, it fulfilled what was incumbent upon it both by definition and obligation.⁴³ It submitteth unto its definition by cleaving unto the other letters,⁴⁴ in as much as they are of its kind, unlike the *Alif* which standeth aloof from the letters when it precedeth them, though they attain unto it as a Finality; and verily *thy Lord is the Uttermost End*”.



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39. But for the mediation of the *Bā’* of the *Basmalah*, which on the one hand clearly suggests the *Alif* while on the other hand it is distinguished from it precisely by the lower curve which joins it to the other letters, it would not have been possible for us to see the *Alif* in the other letters. Otherwise expressed, but for the mediation of the Word made flesh, the latent Divinity in men could never be brought out.

40. Lest we should think that the coexistence of free will and predestination in man is impossible. The *Bā’* is in fact an image of this coexistence, for its resemblance to the *Alif* symbolizes man’s relative free will, whereas its difference from the *Alif* symbolizes man’s predestination.

41. A comment, by the Prophet, on the verse: *He is the First and the Last and the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden* (Tirmidhī, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ḥadīd*; Ibn Ḥanbal, VI, 370).

42. A reference to Qur’ān, XVIII, 77–82.

43. Referring to the Prophet’s fulfilment of the normal functions of the human being, which were his by definition, and of his apostolic obligations.

44. *Bā’* is joined to the letters on either side of it, *Alif* only to a letter that precedes it.