



JAFR

JAFR, a term of uncertain etymology (for which, see below) used to designate the major divinatory art in Islamic mysticism and gnosis, the *'elm al-jafr* (the science of jafr) also simply *al-'elm*. It is of discovering the predestined fate of nations, dynasties, religions, and individuals by a variety of methods and is represented by a vast literature that is well documented already during the Umayyad period, and more so during the 'Abbasid period (Fahd, pp. 375-77; idem, pp. 595-96; idem, 1966, pp. 219-45; Colin; Knysh; see also [BĀṬEN](#)).

Given the underlying thrust of this science, an important component of jafr-literature is the *malāḥem*, apocalyptic predictions (or *ḥedṭān*), prophetic and apocalyptic speculations in prose or verse concerning past, present, and future events up to the coming of the Mahdi (Macdonald; Editors, p. 216; Hartmann). For Jafr proper, the major tool is the science of letters, *'elm al-ḥoruf*, based on the numerical values of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet in the order of the Abjad (q.v.; [Table 1](#)). It is applied to words, phrases, and letters of the Qur'ān, the prophetic traditions (Hadith), and other sources considered divinely inspired (Fahd, pp. 595-96; Colin; Knysh). Specific subsets include the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God (Gardet), the seven letters not found in the Surat al-fāteḥa, and the fourteen mysterious letters of the Qur'ān that open twenty-nine of the suras (Welch, pp. 412-14).

As such, jafr intersects with letter magic, *simiā* (Macdonald and Fahd, pp. 612-13), the interpretation of the primordial lettered *lawḥ-e maḥfuz* "safely preserved tablet" (Wensinck and Bosworth p. 698), containing all knowledge of the preordained course of the world; the art of lettered magic squares



(Sesiano, pp. 28-31), and with astrology. A skeptic account of the art is given by Ebn Ḳaldun (q.v.; d. 1406) in the chapter: “Forecasting the future of dynasties and nations, including a discussion of predictions (malāḥem) and an exposition of the subject called ‘divination’” (jafr; Ebn Ḳaldun, tr., II, pp. 200-31).

The divine gift of Jafr is foremost correlated with the Shi‘ite notion of the prophetic afflatus transmitted from Adam through Moḥammad to the descendants of Fāṭema, that is, the Alids. The secret *Ketāb-e jafr* is supposed to have been in the possession of the sixth Shi‘ite Imam, Ja‘far al-Šādeq (d. 765, q.v.). It is said to have been handed down from Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb, assumed to have been the first to have practiced jafr. Other sources mentioned, particularly regarding apocalyptic, are attributed to the prophet Dāniāl. By fanciful interpretation and etymology, the noun jafr in the title of Ja‘far al-Šādeq’s book, which among other meanings may refer to a weaned lamb or kid (Lane, II, s.v. “jfr”), is related to the leather bag believed to have contained secret scrolls or to the leather on which the secret texts were written (Ebn Ḳaldun, tr., II, p. 210; Kolayni, I, pp. 348-49).

Jafr, while representing a long indigenous Islamic intellectual and cognitive endeavor focused on the prophetic texts, continues and develops the gnostic-mystical theory, or technique, of Hellenistic Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic cosmological letter and number speculations (for these, including Jewish traditions, see Dornseiff, pp. 142-45, still the most detailed treatment of these subjects). The numerological principles and operations for revealing the message hidden in the Qur‘ān ultimately derive from the mathematics of the Pythagoreans, as does the spiritual and dialectic style which is inseparable from its sacred form which, nevertheless, only aided the intrinsically Islamic approach (Nasr, pp. 75-76). From among the various pre-Islamic Near Eastern schools and traditions, an important input into the emergence and development of jafr quite likely came from the extensive divinatory and apocalyptic literature of pre-Islamic Iran (see [DIVINATION](#); [APOCALYPTIC i. In Zoroastrianism](#), [ii. in Muslim Iran](#)). The latter ultimately reflects the dialectic teachings of the Gathas (q.v.) of Zarathustra, which are the archetype of emanational cosmology and apocalyptic vision and ethics. Such input would suggest the possibility that the Arabic term jafr was influenced, at least, by an Iranian term, most directly Parthian *žafra* “deep,” assuming adjustment of ž to Arabic j (Av. *jafra-* [also *gufra-*] “deep, mysterious,” Mid. Pers. *žufra*, New Pers. *žarf*).



Within Islamic tradition, *jafr* is an exegetical method that complemented *taṭbīq*, the discovery of correspondences (foremost between ontological levels), and *ta'wīl*, the allegorical exegesis of the Qur'ān and prophetic sayings, often based on associated meanings derived from the root letters of words. This approach to revealing insights into the ontological continuum between the levels of the macro-cosmos and micro-cosmos seeks patterns of allusion (*ešāra*) accessible to the spiritual elite, which transcend the explicit literal expression (*'ebāra*) intended for the masses (*'awāmm*), but are still below the subtleties (*laṭā'ef*), accessible to *awliā'* (q.v.), the friends of God, and the level of the *ḥaqā'eq* “profound realities,” accessible only to prophets, according to the commentary attributed to Ja'far al-Šādeq (q.v.), which is included in Moḥammad Solami's *Ḥaqā'eq al-tafsīr* (Nwyia, 1968, pp. 181-230; idem, 1970, pp. 210-11).

There has been a continuous line of mystic and gnostic movements and prominent individuals engaged in certain or most aspects of numerical speculations and *jafr*. Omitting theologians such as Abu Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazālī (d. 505/111, q.v.) and Qur'ānic commentators who wrote on the *al-asmā' al-ḥosnā* and/or the *ḥoruf*, these include: (1) the late 5th-century Mazdakites and the later Kōrramdinis (see Madelung); (2) the Isma'īlis (q.v.); the 10th-century Ekwān al-Šafā' (q.v.); (3) individuals, including Avicenna (Ebn Sinā d. 428/1037; q.v.), Šehāb-al-Din Sohravardi (d. 587/1191); Abu'l-'Abbās Aḥmad Buni (d. 622/1225; see Dietrich), Ebn al-'Arabi (d. 638/1240; q.v.); and 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Beštāmi (d. 858/1454; q.v.); (4) later movements, including the Ḥorufis (see [HORUFISM](#)), a Muslim sect founded by Fażl-Allāh Astarābādi (d. 796/1394, q.v.), who distinctly added the four Persian letters (“p,” “č,” “ž,” “g”) to the twenty-eight Arabic letters; the Bektāšiya (q.v.); Maḥmud Paṣiḳāni (d. 831/1427), the founder of the Noḡṭawiya “Pointers” Order (Babayan, pp. 57-117; Algar), who believed that all creation and knowledge is ultimately contained in the first emanative differentiating power point, the one under the Arabic letter “b” of the initial *bessmellāh* (q.v.) “in the name of God,” of the first Sura of the Qur'ān, the *Surat al-fāteḥa*; Shaikhism, founded by Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'i (d. 1826; q.v.); Babism, founded by Mirzā Moḥammad-'Alī, known as the Bāb (executed 1850, q.v.; see also [BABISM](#)); and Bahatism.

Similar to cabbalistic *gematria* in Jewish tradition, the quasi-alchemical divinatory techniques to find hidden dates and connections involve two distinct aspects of letters, numerical and non-numerical. A simple additive example is the foretelling by Ebn al-'Arabi of the Almohads' victory over the



Christians at Alarcos (al-Arak) on the Iberian Peninsula, when pointed by a mysterious friend to the phrase *fathān mobinan* “clear victory” (Qur’ān 48:1; the numerical value of the phrase, according to the Abjad table, is 592, corresponding to 1195-96 C.E.; Ebn al-‘Arabi, 1971, p. 29). Another example is the association of two names with the same date, for instance, the birth year of Timur, 736/1336, which is also the year that the last Il-khan, Abu Sa’id (q.v.) died, for which was found the chronogram *lawḍ* (LVD) “refuge” (3+6+700; Roemer, p. 181; Browne, III, p. 58). Or, two fundamental terms are found to have the same numerical value, such as the sacred number 19 in Babism and Bahaism, which is encoded in the equation of *wāḥed* (VĀḤD; 6+1+8+4) “the One,” with *wojud* (VJVD; 6+3+6+4) “existence.” More complex operations include addition and subtraction (e.g., *dud az Ḳorāsān bar āmad* “smoke came up from Khorasan” for the death year of the poet Jāmi, obtained by subtracting the numerical value of “dud” [14] from that of “Ḳorāsān” [912]; Brown, III, p. 512); anagrammatic transposition; replacement of letters by others from various types of alphabetic arrangements; the combination with letters from significant words, such as the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God with those of the names of the desired object; the *notaricon*, that is, acronymic exegesis by which each letter is replaced by a different significant word (for a variety of chronograms, see Naṣrābādi, pp. 468 ff.).

On a metaphysical cosmic scale, letters are assigned an ontological status of active creative constituents (for the Greco-Roman tradition of this concept, cf. “*Stoichaion-Element*,” in Dornseiff, pp. 14-16). The emanated cosmos is perceived as a hierarchical, multi-level dynamic matrix, each level of which is coded by a distinct letter of the Arabic alphabet. Thereby the sacred texts become accessible for exegesis by establishing the correspondence of the macro-cosmic and micro-cosmic hierarchies with the alpha-numerical hierarchies (e.g., see Cole, pp. 1-23, on the cognitive frameworks of this world view). An example is the above alpha-numerical table of Ebn Sinā (Nasr, p. 210), here modified by spacing to highlight the main ontological sets (Table 2).

This cosmic-hierarchical Table encodes two significant numbers. The total number of levels is 19. Level 19 (R), as the all-inclusive highest level, embraces the other levels, (A-Q) = 18. These two numbers evidently imply reference to the much discussed set of 18 or 19 letters of the *bismellāh* (B-SM ALLH ALRḤMN ALRḤYM), and, considering the Muslim lunar calendar, are also reminiscent of the eighteen-year “Saros” cycle of lunar eclipses and the nineteen-year “Metonic” lunar cycle. At the same time, the number 19 is



associated with the basic nine-house magic (Saturn) square, known in Islamic tradition by its corner letters as *boduḥ* (BDWH; Macdonald, p. 153; Table 3) and in China as the “Nine Steps of Jü” (Nasr, p. 211), steps that in fact trace stars of Ursa Major (cf. Schafer, p. 240).

This square encodes multiple hidden correlations to the alphabet, to arithmetic series and geometric figures, and to other patterns. Among others, the number of the gnomon of $4-9-2-7-6 = 28$ (top and right sides of the magic square) equals the number of the Arabic alphabet. The remaining sub-square, crosswise $1-8-3-5$, sequentially $1-3-5-8 = 17$, is another sacred number related to the four natures of metals, and of other fundamental cosmic sets (Nasr, 1976, p. 195).

Not all of the alpha-numerical cosmic hierarchies adhere to the strict sequence or number of the Arabic alphabet. Louis Massignon (tr., pp. 68-72) includes a synoptic “Table of the ‘Philosophical’ Alphabet (JAFR)” that collates the various symbolic values assigned to each of the Arabic letters by select Islamic thinkers with those assigned to the corresponding letters in the Hebraic, Christian, and Greek traditions. In essence then, specific sacred words and names of the prophetic texts were seen as a divine logogram “*mo‘ammā*” or chronogram (q.v.) “*mādda tāriḳ*,” that needs to be deciphered (Windfuhr, forthcoming). In doing so, the mystic adepts, illustrious or not, used the same techniques by which names and dates are encoded into pleasing phrases and verse in the Islamic art of riddling, just as they produced their own logograms and chronograms in their poetry and writings.

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