

Remarks on the universal symbolism of the number 72

Timothy Scott

Introduction

In *After Babel*, George Steiner's influential work on language and translation, the author has occasion to reflect that 'Almost all linguistic mythologies, from Brahmin wisdom to Celtic and North African lore, concurred in believing that original speech had shivered into 72 shards, or into a number which was a simple multiple of 72.'¹ He remarks that the origins of this particular number remain obscure, despite Arno Borst's "exhaustive inquiries," and suggests an astronomical or seasonal correlation from the 6×12 component.² No doubt such a component exists but, with due respect to Steiner who, of course, is writing on linguistics and not symbolism as such, it is over hasty to reduce the meaning of this number to a purely naturalistic interpretation. In the Judaic tradition this number is intimately associated with nothing less than the Name of God Itself. Annemarie Schimmel observes that 'the number 72 appears everywhere ... to denote fullness composed of different elements';³ she recognises its meaning as that of "plenitude." In their *Dictionary of Symbolism*, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, recognise the relationship of 72 to 70, noting that 'All derivatives or multiples of seven carry with them the idea of wholeness.'⁴ It is this deeper significance of 72 that we seek to explore, recognizing the occurrence of this number in a range of religious traditions and asking if its ubiquity reveals a consistent thread of meaning.

¹ G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of language and translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 62.

² Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 62, fn.1. Steiner is referring to Borst's, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, Stuttgart, 1957-63.

³ A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.266.

⁴ J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, p.867.

Numerology: some cautionary remarks

This investigation should be prefaced with a few cautionary words about the study of number symbolism. There is no denying that the science of numbers plays a fundamental role in many religious and philosophical traditions; one thinks immediately of the Pythagorean tradition. Forms of numerology are found in nearly every tradition of the world. Plato is attributed with referring to numerology as the highest of the sciences.⁵ Jean Cooper observes that, ‘In many traditions, notably the Babylonian, Hindu and Pythagorean, number is a fundamental principle from which the whole objective world proceeds; it is the origin of all things and the harmony of the universe.’⁶ In the kabbalistic practices of *gematria*, *notariqon*, and *temura* the relationships of number, letter, word and meaning are of the deepest mystical significance, while also being treated with systematic rigour. At the same time there is no doubt that a mixture of ignorance, sentimentality and gullibility has often reduced this type of symbolism to the level of fortune telling and fantasy. In the modern mind, numerology, like astrology, appears as little more than a fanciful game, if not a delusion. Part of the problem is the degree to which numerology is open to contrivance. Umberto Eco parodied this deliciously in his novel, *Foucault’s Pendulum*: ‘With numbers’ says the mysterious Agliè, ‘you can do anything you like.’ He continues,

“Suppose I have the sacred number 9 and I want to get the number 1314, date of the execution of Jacques de Molay—a date dear to anyone who, like me professes devotion to the Templar tradition of knighthood. What do I do? I multiply nine by one hundred and forty-six, the fateful day of the destruction of Carthage. How did I arrive at this? I divided thirteen hundred and fourteen by two, by three, et cetera, until I found a satisfying date. I could also have divided thirteen

⁵ *Epinomis* 976E. It is generally accepted that Plato was not in fact the author of this appendix to the *Laws*; still, even if this is so it nevertheless represents one of the first “Platonisms.” Plato does, however, talk of the “invention of number” as coming from the “supremely beneficial function” of sight, which was a gift from the gods (*Timaeus* 47A-B).

⁶ J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.113. In the enigmatic words of the Islamic mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī: ‘The One brought number into being, and number analysed the one, and the relation of number was produced by the object of numeration’ (*Fusus* cited in W. Perry ed., *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.779. Ralph Austin’s translation has ‘The number one makes number possible, and number deploys the one’ (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, p.86).

hundred and fourteen by 6.28, the double of 3.14, and I would have got two hundred and nine. That is the year Attalus I, king of Pergamon, ascended the throne. You see?”

Yet this apparent dismissal of numerology serves to offer a deeper appreciation of the place of numbers in the cosmos.

“Then you don’t believe in numerologies of any kind,” Diotallevi said, disappointed.

“On the contrary, I believe firmly. I believe the universe is a great symphony of numerical correspondences, I believe that numbers and their symbolisms provide a path to special knowledge. But if the world, below and above, is a system of correspondences where tout se tient, it’s natural for the kiosk and the pyramid, both works of man, to reproduce in their structure, unconsciously, the harmonies of the cosmos...”⁷

For the sceptic, practices such as *gematria* appear to manipulate numbers to contrive capricious meanings. From a traditional perspective, *gematria* is an expression of a hermeneutic recognition of the interconnectedness of all things.

Let us consider a greatly simplified illustration of the type of thing being discussed. The number 318, which happens to be the number of Abraham’s servants (Gen.14.14), can be reduced by addition to the number 12 ($3 + 1 + 8 = 12$), producing an obvious astrological symbolism, which one might then attribute to the *Genesis* account.⁸ One can further derive a triadic or even a Trinitarian symbolism from the number 12 ($1 + 2 = 3$), if one were so inclined. The development of a triadic symbolism may or may not be justified, but in the case of developing a Trinitarian symbolism from the story of Abraham there is a transition between traditions—Judaic to Christian—that raises serious questions about syncretism. This issue is more complicated than it might first appear. To suggest a “Judaic Trinity” from a symbolic occurrence of the number three, as might be found in the Hebraic Scriptures, is on the whole unjustifiable; while Judaism may have a

⁷ U. Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, London: Picador, 1989, pp.288-9.

⁸ An astrological reading is justified with *Genesis* 14, without limiting this extremely potent passage to this type of interpretation. I hope to consider this episode in detail on another occasion.

conception of God as Father and even of Israel as the “children of God,” it does not have a conception of an incarnate “Son.” However, for a Christian to recognise the Trinity in the Old Testament, as for example many of the Church Fathers did with the three angels at Mamre (Gen.18:2), is entirely normative of the Christian reading of Hebraic scripture. This is a matter of sufficient spiritual economy.

It is not my intention to elaborate the pitfalls of practices such as *gematria*; in my opinion, there is value in such practices within a traditional framework. In a scholarly study, it is best that these types of practices, if they are to be used, are employed judiciously, as to complement conclusions about symbolisms that have already been drawn through other, less “perilous” means.

Having at least alerted the reader to the “danger” of number symbolism let us balance this by noting that traditional numerology, like all *scientia sacra*, is precise and intelligible.⁹ As Frithjof Schuon remarks,

The symbolic language of the great traditions of mankind may indeed seem arduous and baffling to some minds, but it is nevertheless perfectly intelligible in the light of the orthodox commentaries; symbolism—this point must be stressed—is a real and rigorous science, and nothing can be more naïve than to suppose that its apparent naïvety springs from an immature and “prelogical” mentality. This science, which can properly be described as “sacred,” quite plainly does not have to adjust itself to the modern experimental approach; the realm of revelation, of symbolism, of pure and direct intellection, stands in fact above both the physical and psychological realms, and consequently it lies beyond the scope of so-called scientific methods.¹⁰

Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that symbolism ‘is a language and a precise form of thought; a hieratic and a metaphysical language and not a language determined by somatic or psychological categories.’¹¹ Similarly,

⁹ On the traditional understanding of symbolism see T. Scott, ‘Understanding “Symbol”’, *Sacred Web* 6, 2000, pp.91-106; on *scientia sacra* see S. H Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, Ch.4.

¹⁰ F. Schuon, ‘No Activity without Truth’ in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, p.29.

¹¹ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Nature of Buddhist Art’ in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art & Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsy, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.174; see also ‘The

Seyyed Hossein Nasr says that the ‘symbol is not based on man-made conventions. It is an aspect of the ontological reality of things and as such is independent of man’s perception of it.’¹²

Against the type of contrivance to which Eco alerts us there are serious scholars of *scientia sacra* who defend their conclusions according to established laws of symbolism, the same way that the physicist works within certain natural laws. Thus it is worth noting that within numerology there is definite and precise meaning to both addition and multiplication. René Guénon, who has offered some of the most insightful explanations of traditional symbols in the modern era, remarks that in both the Chinese tradition of the Far-East and the Pythagorean tradition of the West, odd numbers are said to be masculine or active (*yang*), while even numbers are feminine or passive (*yin*).¹³ Because they are *yang*, odd numbers can be termed “celestial,” and for the simple reason that the action of Heaven is strictly “actionless” (*wei wu wei*, “actionless action”) the effect of these celestial numbers upon other numbers can be described as an “action of presence,” which is expressed by addition. Even numbers, because they are *yin*, can be described as “terrestrial”; as Guénon observes, the reaction of Earth with regard to Heaven, ‘gives rise to multiplication of the celestial number 3 by the terrestrial number 2, because the potentiality inherent in substance (Earth) is the very root of multiplicity.’¹⁴ Whereas three and two are respectively expressions of the intrinsic natures of Heaven and Earth, six and five are expressions of the relationships between Heaven and Earth.¹⁵ Here six becomes associated with Heaven and five with Earth; this appears to contradict the attribution of odd numbers as being celestial and even numbers as being terrestrial, however, this inversion accords with what Guénon calls the “law of inverse analogy,” whereby ‘Whatever is at the lowest level corresponds, by inverse analogy, to what is at the highest level.’¹⁶ Schuon expands this when he notes the two-fold nature of analogy:

Interpretation of Symbolism’ in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, R. Coomaraswamy ed., Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004.

¹² S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1972, p.88.

¹³ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.58. What follows is essentially a paraphrase of Ch.8 of this work.

¹⁴ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, p.62.

¹⁵ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.867.

¹⁶ R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995, p.186, see also Ch.25 and *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; *The Great Triad*, Ch.7. This law follows the oft quoted

If between one level of reality and another there is a parallel analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship: for example, there is a parallel analogy between earthly and heavenly beauty, but there is an inverse analogy as regards their respective situations, in the sense that earthly beauty is “outward” and divine Beauty “inward”; or again, to illustrate this law by symbols: according to certain Sufic teachings, earthly trees are reflections of heavenly trees, and earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (parallel analogy); but heavenly trees have their roots above and heavenly women are naked (inverse analogy, what is “below” becoming “above”, and what is “inward” becoming “outward”).¹⁷

As we have noted elsewhere, ‘to appreciate number symbolism one must be aware of two basic, yet seemingly contradictory, guidelines: on the one hand, symbolism is a precise science which demands contextual understanding; on the other hand, symbols are homogeneous and hermeneutically dynamic.’¹⁸

Universal occurrences of the number 72

The number 72 cannot be seen apart from a host of other numbers, principally: 7, 70, 71, 72 and 73—of these we will have more to say in due course. Chevalier and Gheerbrant recognise the following pertinent relationships:

70 is ten times seven—a superlative equal to two-fold perfection—and 72 may be divided by nine numbers – 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 18, 24 and 36. It is also eight times nine and, above all one fifth of 360, that is to say one fifth of the Zodiac. Seventy-seven and seven times seven are self explanatory as well as 700, 7000, 70,000, 700,000. In short, this is an incidence of all the perfect numbers.¹⁹

Hermetic aphorism, ‘As Above So Below,’ taken from Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘It is true without lie, certain and most veritable, that what is below is like what is above and that what is above is like what is below, to perpetrate the miracles of one thing.’

¹⁷ F. Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993, p.84, n.2; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.106, n.1; *Language of the Self*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1999, pp.35-6, where he refers to “direct” and “inverse” analogy.

¹⁸ T. Scott, ‘Remarks on confusions inherent in number symbolism’, *Sacred Web* 16, 2006, p.164.

¹⁹ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.859.

Schimmel recognises the importance of 70 as the tenfold of the sacred seven, ‘and thus, as it were, its “great form.”’²⁰ However, as she notes, 72 is much more important than 70.

As $\frac{1}{5}$ of the circle’s circumference, it is related to the sacred 5, and because of its links to 5, 6, and 12, and also 8, 72 became a favourite number in ancient times. Already in antiquity it was known that the vernal point of the sun advances by 1 degree of the zodiac every 72 years.²¹

The sense of perfection attributed to the number seven can be recognised at various levels but is most evident in seven’s cosmogonic symbolism, all other examples reflecting this according to the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Seven is commonly recognised as the number of cosmic perfection, the most immediate example being the biblical account of the creation of the cosmos in “six days.” Chevalier and Gheerbrant note that seven is also the devil’s number, ‘since Satan “the ape of God,” always tries to imitate God’.²² This, in a sense, is to consider Creation in terms of its malefic symbolism, the *contemptus mundi* of the Christian tradition. An adequate symbolic description of the cosmogonic process is provided by the image of the spatial point, which in turn is “realised” by the sphere.²³ The sphere is adequately expressed by the six spatial directions, being the four directions of the compass on the horizontal plane and the directions of the zenith and nadir along the vertical axis. The seventh direction is then the return to the centre. The six directions refer to spatio-temporal manifestation, which is to say the domain of distinction or difference, and in turn, movement. The seventh direction—the centre—is beyond movement, and is thus described as being at “rest”—‘And on the seventh day God rested’ (Gen.2:2). The number seven ‘through being a return to the centre, to the First cause, derives from the group of six and perfects the whole.’²⁴

²⁰ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.263.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.263.

²² Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.862.

²³ For a detailed exposition of this symbolism see R. Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac, 1975; see also K. Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*, Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1999, pp.9-13.

²⁴ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1996) p.860.

The number 72 is ubiquitous in the various traditions of the world; in many cases it is treated as effectively interchangeable with the number 70, although there are important differences. The following survey focuses, to a degree, on the appearance of these numbers in the Abrahamic traditions. We then move to consider examples of this number in other traditions. The survey is far from exhaustive. We might equally produce similar lists for a variety of numbers, and in this sense 72 is not unique. The number 72 is, however, conspicuous by its universality and homogeneity, and its key association with the “creative power” of God.



The Abrahamic traditions refer to 70 or 72 languages born of the destruction of the tower of Babel. This number is not mentioned in *Genesis* 11 but rather derived, according to haggadic tradition, from the ethnological table given in *Genesis* 10. Here 70 grandsons of Noah are enumerated, each of whom, it is said, became the ancestor of a nation and the founder of a language. These 70 languages become the expression for the totality of humanity. This idea is developed through a connection between the number of “faces” of the Torah and the number of builders of the tower of Babel. The Torah, remarks Gershom Scholem, is said to have “70 faces” shining forth to the initiate;²⁵ the sixteenth century kabbalist, Isaac Luria, spoke of 600,000 “faces” of the Torah, as many as there were souls in Israel at the time of the Revelation, that is, the number of Israelites that left Egypt with Moses (Ex.13:37).²⁶ Luria’s 600,000 faces accords with the number of men that the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (c. 833 CE) records as being used to build the tower of Babel.²⁷ In both cases the number is an expression of the totality of peoples (Israelites) that constitute human existence, which, from a deeper perspective, is to say Existence *per se*. Again, Judaism talks of “the 70 modes of exposition of the Torah,” this being the classical expression for the many senses that may be attributed to the words of Holy Writ; this, in turn, is connected with the haggadic idea

²⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.210.

²⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.210.

²⁷ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.24 cited in A. S. Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, London: Senate, 1995, p.237.

that the Revelation on Sinai was divided into the 70 languages, so as to be for all the peoples of the earth.²⁸

Scholem observes that the author of the *Zohar* often stresses that the whole of the Torah is ‘nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.’²⁹ The number 72 is in turn intimately connected with the Divine Name.³⁰ The medieval kabbalists derived the *Shemhamphorasch* [“the unpronounceable name”; the 72 lettered name of God] from *Exodus* 14:19-21. Schimmel notes that this is ‘the knotted numerological sum of all 72 mystical names of God.’³¹ In the apocalyptic literature of Enoch we find “the 70 Names of God” (*3Enoch* 48B) and “the 70 names of Metatron”—alternatively given as 72—(*3Enoch* 48D), where Metatron is the angel with the same name as his Master.³² According to Josephus, the *Septuagint* is translated by 72 translators in exactly 72 days.³³ Here again the number 72 is being associated with the “production” of the divine “Word.” The *Septuagint*, counts 72 grandsons of Noah, hence 72 nations and languages. The interchange between 70 and 72 should not be seen as a matter of “error.” Rather, this shift can be attributed to distinct but complementary meanings. In the notes to his translation of *3Enoch*, P. Alexander remarks upon the interchange between 70 and 72 names while noting that the actual list has in fact upwards to 93 names according to the manuscript consulted. Nevertheless, and regardless of the question of validity of each name, it is important to note that there are always considered to be either 70 or 72 names, which highlights the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of this figure.³⁴

St. Augustine prolongs the use of the number 72;³⁵ it is in turn repeated by the venerable Bede³⁶ and Remigius.³⁷ In the Christian tradition Christ

²⁸ W. Bacher, ‘72 Modes of Exposition’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 4.3, 1892, p. 509.

²⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.210.

³⁰ There are other forms, such as the forty-two letter Name, the twelve letter Name and, of course, the Tetragrammaton.

³¹ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.264.

³² *Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin* 38a, from *Exodus* 23:21: ‘My name is in him.’

³³ Antiquities 12. ii *passim*. ascribes to Aristeeas a letter, written to Philocrates, describing the Greek translation of the Hebrew Law by 72 interpreters sent into Egypt from Jerusalem at the request of the librarian of Alexandria, resulting in the Septuagint translation.

³⁴ Alexander, ‘Appendix to 3 Enoch’: *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol.1*, J. H. Charlesworth ed., Doubleday: New York, 1983, p.313, note a.

³⁵ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 16.3 (527-28).

³⁶ Bede, *Commentary on Genesis: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 118A, 161.

³⁷ Remigius, *Commentary on Genesis: Patrologia Latina* ed. Minge 131, 81c.

himself is the “Word”; his word is then dispersed throughout the world by 72 personally appointed disciples (Lk.10.1), whose names are, as it were, ‘written in heaven’(Lk.10.20). The connection between Christ and the number 72 is further developed through the identification of the Christological priesthood with the line of Melchizedek (Heb.7:17), for, as Alexander observes, the presentation of the heavenly Melchizedek of Qumran suggests a clear parallel with the Metatron of *3Enoch*.³⁸ Melchizedek is again identified with Noah’s son, Shem, whose name means “name” and connotes the “Name of God.”³⁹ The divine Name and divine Word are, with the divine Sound, three expressions of the same reality. The Word is “with God” and “is the same as God” (Jn.1:1) and through the Word are all things made (Jn.1:3).

The association of 72 with the creative Sound is suggested again in Christian exegesis, where it is said that 72 was the number of bells on the priest’s breastplate (Ex.28:17-21), which is then said to have pointed to the 72 disciples of Christ sent to spread the Gospel in the 72 languages of the world, each one of which stands for one Divine Name.⁴⁰ As Chevalier & Gheerbrant note, ‘The symbolism of the bell is governed by the different perceptions of the sound which it makes’;⁴¹ however, in general one can say that this symbolism is usually associated with the echo of the primordial vibration, which is the very “stuff” of creation. Cooper observes that, in the Hebrew tradition, the bells and pomegranates of the Ephod symbolise the Quintessence and the four elements respectively.⁴² In Islamic tradition the “Ringing of the Bell” (*salsalat al-jaras*) expresses the creative Sound, as heard by the Prophet at the time of the revelation of the Qur’an.

Islamic tradition is resplendent with references to both 70 and 72. In the *History of the Prophets and Kings*, by the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari, Allah destroys the tower of Babil and then confuses the language of mankind, formerly Syriac, into 72 languages. According to a *hadīth*, ‘The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The Jews were split up into 71 or 72 sects; and the Christians were split up into 71 or 72 sects; and my

³⁸ Alexander, ‘Introduction to 3 Enoch’: *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol.1*, p.250.

³⁹ A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.236. See the *Jerusalem Targum*, Gen.14:18. *Midrash Tanchuma*, Gen.8.16 refers to a figure called “Shem-Melchizedek.”

⁴⁰ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.266.

⁴¹ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.860.

⁴² Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, p.20.

community will be split up into 73 sects.”⁴³ The relationship between these three numbers is discussed below.

Another *hadīth* talks of 72 *hourī* in Paradise.⁴⁴ Misconceptions aside, the idea of the *hourī* refers to an aspect of paradise. In this context the 72 *hourī* appear to accord with the idea of there being 72 heavenly kingdoms (3*Enoch* 17:8), each under the supervision of an angel who acts to control the cycles of the constellations (17:6).⁴⁵ The word *hourī* (*hūrīyah*) is comprised of *hur* and *in*, where *hur* is the plural of both *ahwar* (masculine) and *hawra* (feminine). In general, *hur* implies “most beautiful eye” irrespective of the person’s gender. Symbolically, there is the sense that the *hourī* are androgynous allowing for both senses of this term, that is to say, the combination of the sexes and the transcending of sex, according to the perspective adopted. The same idea is found with most conceptions of angels. In both cases paradise or heaven is being recognised in terms of the symbolism of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁴⁶

The 72 *hourī* and the 72 celestial kingdoms relate this number to the positive symbolism of heaven; it is interesting then to note that the Qur’an uses this number to describe one of the punishments of Hell, describing the sinner as bound by a chain of length 70 cubits (*al-Hāqqah* 69:32). This implies something of the dual nature of this symbolism, as we alluded to when we recognised the relationship of the number seven to the *contemptus mundi*. This sense is also suggested by the association of the number 72 with various “evil” forces. Chevalier and Gheerbrant note there being 72 diseases in Islamic tradition.⁴⁷ Similarly, there are 72 malignant spirits in Chinese folk medicine.⁴⁸ In the *Chuang-tzu* we find 72 treacherous rulers.⁴⁹ The legendary Chinese ruler, Shen Nong, is said to have discovered tea as an antidote to the 72 poisons he encountered in the development of traditional

⁴³ *Sunan Abu Dawūd*, Bk.40, *hadīth* 4579.

⁴⁴ *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* Vol. IV, Ch. 2, *hadīth* 2687.

⁴⁵ The 72 angels are identified with the 70 “shepherds” given control of the exiled “sheep” (*I Enoch* 89:59).

⁴⁶ See T. Scott, ‘Notes on the mystery of the *coincidentia oppositorum*’, *Sacred Web* 9, 2002, pp.11-35.

⁴⁷ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.867.

⁴⁸ See, for example, S. B. Burns, J. L. Burns, ‘Chinese Folk Medicine: The Ceremony of Driving Away the 72 Malignant Spirits’, *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 5(4), 1999, pp.327-328.

⁴⁹ *The Writings of Chuang Tzu*, tr. J. Legge, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891, 14. 2. 7, 8.

Chinese medicine.⁵⁰ This association with disease is again noted by Kypros Chrysanthis who observes the prevalent use of the number 72 in the folk medicine of Greece.⁵¹

This duality is again suggested by the connection of this number with the tower of Babel conceived as *axis mundi*, for axial symbolism precisely entails both upward and downward movement. According to the *Sefer al-Jashar* and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* the workers who carried the bricks up the tower of Babel ascended on the east side, while those who descended had to go down on the west side.⁵² This in turn suggests the rise and fall of the Sun indicating a temporal aspect to this symbolism. In this context, *hadithic* literature records the Prophet as explaining that ‘the distance between Heaven and Earth is 71, 72, or 73 years.’⁵³ This idea of the “distance” between heaven and earth suggests a parallel with the axial symbolism of the tower of Babel; the measure of this in “years” suggests the interconnectedness of time and space in the process of cosmological manifestation.



In the mythology of the ancient Egyptians we find Osiris imprisoned and murdered by his brother Set with the aid of 72 companions.⁵⁴ This idea of 72 “companions” is also found in the Chinese tradition. Sima Qian, in his *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, wrote that, ‘Those who, in their own person, became conversant with the Six Disciplines (taught by Confucius), numbered 72’; *Mencius* gives their number as 70.⁵⁵ Schimmel observes that Confucius is also said to have lived for 72 years.⁵⁶ We have already noted the 70 languages that indicate 70 peoples of Israel, the 72 disciples who spread the word of Christ, and the 71 / 72 / 73 sects mentioned by the Prophet. Similarly,

⁵⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shen_Nong.

⁵¹ K. Chrysanthis, ‘The Magic Numbers Three, Seven and Seventy-two in Cypriote Folk-Medicine’, *Folklore* 57. 2, 1946, p. 83, citing G. K. Spyridakis, ‘The Number 72’, *Aphieroina eis ton K.L.Amanton*, Athens, 1940, p. 415.

⁵² See Rappoport ed., *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.237.

⁵³ *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Bk.40, *hadith* 4705.

⁵⁴ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Hieroglyphic Transcript and Translation into English of the Papyrus of Ani*, New York: Random House, 1960, p.54.

⁵⁵ R. Jeffrey, “Confucius”: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2006 Edition)*, E. Zalta ed. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/confucius>).

⁵⁶ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.266.

in Vaishnava Hinduism there are 72 *Maheshwari khand* (sub clans; last names) originating from the tale of King Sujansen and his 72 soldiers, who were turned to stone by *rishis* before being returned to life by Shiva.⁵⁷ The association of this number with these groupings seems to have much less to do with a question of quality than with a symbolic description of a certain quality involved in each case.

In the Egyptian story Osiris was imprisoned in a chest and set adrift on the Nile, while Isis' searched for him throughout the world. This myth bares striking similarities with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, in each case both agrarian and astrological symbolism is evident. In noting this I want to emphasise that these levels of symbolism are both valid and necessary at their particular level; still, in the final analysis these simply express, at the appropriate level of manifestation and by analogy, a principal metaphysical symbolism.

Another instance of this figure in the Egyptian tradition is most revealing. According to Herodotus, the Egyptian mummification process involved being 'placed in natrum [a form of salt mixture], covered entirely over, for 70 days—never longer.'⁵⁸ Some suggest that the mummification period totalled 70 days; however, an inscription on the tomb of Meresankh III suggests a period of 200 days. Setting aside the technicalities of the mummification process there is little doubt the number 70 had a key significance in this process. This is confirmed in the Bible were we read that the Egyptians mourned Jacob for 70 days (Gen.50:3). It has been suggested that this figure follows an astrological basis: there being a duration of 70 days during which the dog star, Sirius, disappeared from the sky until it reappeared marking the Egyptian New Year. This astrological passage adequately describes a passage through darkness, or the underworld, before a rebirth. Similar symbolism is alluded to by the duration Jonah remained in the belly of the great fish, being three days and three nights, (Jon.2:1) and the time Christ was in the heart of the earth (Matt.12:40); in both cases a period of 72 hours is suggested.⁵⁹ This association of the number 70 or 72

⁵⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maheshwari>.

⁵⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p.161.

⁵⁹ There is some confusion and debate about this timeframe give that Jesus is said to have died in Friday and been resurrected on Sunday, which some argue cannot allow for an exact period of 72 hours. This type of literalistic nitpicking misses the point of the rich symbolism of the number 72 and is far from in keeping with the mindset of the people for whom this tradition was first recorded.

with rebirth is again found in the one of the accounts of the birth of Osiris. Plutarch tells the story of how Hermes (Thoth) won a seventieth part of each day of the year from Selene, thereby creating five days during which Osiris might be born.⁶⁰ In death or birth the number 70 indicates a transformative period or power.

In the classic Chinese story, the *His-yu Chi* (*The Journey West*), Sun Wu-k'ung (the Monkey King) learns the 72 transformations of the Art of the Earthly Multitude from the immortal, Subodhi.⁶¹ He is, in fact, offered the chance to learn the Art of the Heavenly Ladle, which number 36 transformations, but chooses the Art of the Earthly Multitude. According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 36 is 'the number of cosmic solidarity, where the elements meet and from which cycles evolve'; again, 36 'is the number of Heaven, 72 of Earth and 108 mankind.'⁶² This relationship is effectively an account of the totality of manifestation: 36 expresses the principle, 72, the expression, and 108 the complete realisation. Sun Wu-k'ung also battles and defeats the monster kings of the 72 caves.⁶³ There is an explicit astrological symbolism at work here for he also battles the 28 Constellations.

According to Boris Riftin, the number 72 appears often in Chinese folklore; Riftin refers to '72 halls in an underwater palace, 72 merits of a hero and 72 stars in the sky.'⁶⁴ Architectural symbolism involving 72 is common: the temple of the Holy Grail had 72 chapels, just as the big reception hall in Persepolis had 72 pillars.⁶⁵ The relationship between the 72 underwater halls and the 72 stars is interesting. The realm of the stars is universally recognised as "heaven" or the principal realm. In many traditions the sky is understood as a vast "sea," even described as the upper waters. Water is a well known symbol of cosmic potentiality. In a sense one might well say that the lower waters of earth mirror the upper waters of heaven; the underwater halls mirror the stars.

⁶⁰ Budge, *The Book of the Dead*, p.53.

⁶¹ *His-yu Chi* (*The Journey West*), tr. A. C. Yu, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p.91.

⁶² Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.989.

⁶³ *His-yu Chi* (*The Journey West*), p.147.

⁶⁴ B. Riftin, 'Review: *Mythology and Folklore of the Hui: A Muslim Chinese People* (L. Shujiang and K. Luckert)', *Asian Folklore Studies* 57. 2, 1998, p.371.

⁶⁵ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, p.268.

The “distance” between earth and heaven is described by the *axis mundi*, of which there are several well known universal symbols. One of the most obvious is the tree. It may be of little surprise that the *Greater Holy Assembly* of the *Zohar* talks of the “Tree of Life” as having 70 branches.⁶⁶ In the Jewish tradition the image of the Tree of Life is also found in the *menorah*, which properly symbolises the burning bush (Ex.25). So it is that Josephus remarks on the 70 parts of the Temple *menorah*, relating these, in fact, to the astrological *decani* (the 70 divisions of the planets).⁶⁷ Another well known symbol of the *axis mundi* is the ladder, and according to *Midrash*, Jacob’s ladder had 70 rungs, upon which angels of each nation descended and ascended.⁶⁸ This symbolism is repeated in the steps of Solomon’s Throne, which, as described in the *Second Targum of Esther*, had 72 golden lions set out upon them.⁶⁹ Mayan tradition offers a similar image in the 72 stone steps of the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Copán.



A definitive comparison of all mythological occurrences of the number 72 would require in-depth analysis of each episode, a task that is unfeasible. Instead we are looking for commonalities and themes. I do not wish to argue from generalities to conclusions for specific instances; rather it is hoped that these generalities may suggest patterns, of which we may then be at least mindful in further considerations. From the few examples we have here the following motifs arise: languages (word, name), social groups, durations, architectural forms (on the one hand: rooms, caves, halls; on the other hand: levels, steps), companions, malignant forms (poisons, treacherous men, malignant spirits) and meritorious forms (cures, magic transformations).

Common themes may not be immediately apparent; however, in the context of spiritual symbolism a theme does emerge. The first thing to

⁶⁶ *Ha Idra Rabba Qadisha* 692 in tr. MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, p.197.

⁶⁷ *Antiquities*, 3.7.7 (180).

⁶⁸ *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayetze* 2: ‘Said Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman: “These are the princes of the nations of the world...which the Holy Blessed One showed to Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended 70 rungs and descended. Of Medea, 52 steps and descended. Of Greece, 100 steps and descended. Of Edom, it ascended and it is not known how many...”’.

⁶⁹ *Second Targum of Esther*, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.3*, p.237; see 1Kgs.10:20; 2Ch.9:17.

remark is that the divine Name or Sound is a universal symbol of the creative Act; the idea of social groupings is in turn based on the idea of 72 languages; these are, so to speak, the manifestations of the principle. Creation is universally symbolised by the architectural form, principally the Temple or Palace. As Adrian Snodgrass remarks, 'the architectural form is an image of the cosmos, not in stasis, but in dynamic procedure from Unity by way of the cosmogenetic diremption of the conjoint principles [Essence and Substance]; it is a likeness of the cosmos in the manner of its production from Principle.'⁷⁰ In this sense, one can talk of either a horizontal symbolism (chambers) or a vertical symbolism (levels, floors).

This architectural symbolism is complemented by the symbolism of Man. Snodgrass again:

The building is an image of the macrocosm; but it also images the microcosm, the smaller cosmos made up by man. The centre of the architectural form, homologue of the unitary centre of the universe, is also the innermost centre of each being; the body of the temple equates both the body of the cosmos and the body of man; and in return the body of man is a temple, enshrining the Real.⁷¹

The meaning of man is prefigured in the symbolism of Universal Man. Titus Burckhardt observes that the cosmos is 'like a single being ... If one calls him the "Universal Man," it is not by reason of an anthropomorphic conception of the universe, but because man represents, on earth, its most perfect image'.⁷² And just as the universe is comprised of diverse elements so too the divine attributes of Universal Man may be symbolised by His divine Names and also His "companions."

This type of symbolism is both cosmogonic and cosyloitic, both descending and ascending: into creation from the Divine and back to the Divine from creation, or again, into imperfection from Perfection and back to Perfection from imperfection. Thus, from a certain point of view, these corresponding movements are respectively maleficent and beneficent, or malignant and meritorious. All of this is by way of suggesting that the

⁷⁰ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.1*, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990, p.62.

⁷¹ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.1*, p.62.

⁷² Burckhardt, Introduction to 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-insān al-kamīl* (Universal Man), tr. T. Burckhardt, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983, p.iv.

number 72 can be associated, at least in the cases we have considered, with the symbolism of the transformative processes of creation and return.

This suggestion does not preclude an astrological reading of the type that Steiner suggests, which is to recognise the use of 72 in terms of duration. Of course, to say duration is to say time, where to say creation is simultaneously to say space and time. The year is a temporal expression of the transformation from potency to actuality. Equally, to say space is to say form and this is expressed in geometry. The particular geometric form at issue here is the pentagon, in which all five angles are 72 degrees. The pentagon is the form of Man. According to Plato the dodecahedron is the geometric form of the “receptacle of becoming,” which is to say creation.⁷³ The dodecahedron is underpinned by the 72 degrees of each angle of the pentagon, which, in turn, is multiplied by twelve (the fundamental spatial-temporal number). It is worth flagging that this geometric form then allows the 360 degrees of a perfect circle to be multiplied by 12, giving rise to 4320, where the number 432 is a key figure in many and varied traditional doctrines concerned with the extent of Manifestation, both temporally and spatial.



According to traditional understanding each of the twelve zodiacal signs was divided into three parts. Hence the Zodiac was divided into 36 parts. These were again variously subdivided. Considered with respect to the “perfect circle,” they were divided by ten. The number ten expresses the perfect cycle from zero through one to the return of one to zero in the form of ten. It is this perfection of cycle that both the circle and the number ten share that accounts for its use in this division. Each division of ten is a decan. This subdivision into decans produces the following result: $36 \times 10 = 360$. This figure of 360 is both the number of degrees in a circle and the number of days in the sacred year.⁷⁴

⁷³ In the *Phaedo* Socrates implies the dodecahedron in describing the earth as like one of ‘those spherical balls made up of twelve pieces of leather’ (110B); the *Timaeus* offers a description of the four Platonic Solids adding a fifth construction, ‘which the god used for embroidering the constellations on the whole heaven’ (56C). This is commonly taken as the fifth regular solid, the dodecahedron.

⁷⁴ Mircae Eliade observes that the majority of historical cultures had ‘a year, at once lunar and solar, of 360 days (that is, 12 months of 30 days each), to which five intercalary days

Considered with respect to the spatio-temporal cycle, each of the 36 divisions was divided by twelve. Each division of twelve applied to the 36 divisions of the Zodiac is called a *dodecan*. The number twelve apart from being recognised in the expression of the Zodiac itself is symbolically tied to manifest existence through its relationship to the numbers four and three. Four represents the directions of each plane of manifest existence, while three represents the ternary function required to express the state of manifestation. Corresponding to and reflecting this ternary nature in creation there are three recognizable “worlds” or states, variously called heaven–misplace–earth, or heaven–earth–underworld. Each of these states can be envisaged as a plane of existence, which is then expressed by four directions, hence we find manifestation represented by the number twelve, i.e. $3 \times 4 = 12$. Furthermore, $4 + 3 = 7$, thus on the level of three-dimensional spatiality that expresses the plane of manifestation there are seven directions, i.e. the six global directions and the seventh centre point. The subdivision into *dodecans* produces the following result: $36 \times 12 = 432$.

A perfect circle—alluding to the a-temporal and non-spatial Principle—may be expressed numerically by the number 360. Spatio-temporal manifestation is then expressed in its fullness by the number 432. To put this another way: the ontological Principle may be adequately described by the number 360; onto-cosmological Manifestation is expressed by 432. If we then consider the relationship between the Principle and the manifest mode of spatial and temporal existence—which is expressed by the Zodiac—we will note that the “difference” between 360 and 432 is 72.

The act of manifestation is achieved through the concentration of the Divine Potential. This concentrates a point of positive existence which then radiates “outwards”—or “inwards” to use a complementary symbolism—in the fashion of a beam of light illuminating Manifestation. This original point is itself both created, in so much as it is the heart of manifestation itself, and uncreated, in so much as it resides in Transcendence. It is the heart of all contraries and complimentaries, the beginning of all manifestation and the point of return; all manifestation is contained in this point. In principle the Point is a circle of infinite diameter; in its manifest realisation, it is a circle

were added’ (*The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971, p.51; Eliade cites, F. Rock, ‘Das Jahr von 360 Tagen und seine Gliederung’, *Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik* 1, 1930, pp.253-88.

of indefinite diameter. Thus, this Point is symbolically representable by a perfect circle and numerically by the number 360. As we have seen, 432 represents the mode of existence, both spatial and temporal, which we experience as the “created world.” Hence, 72 expresses the “progression” or transmission from the creative Principle to creation itself.

The number 72 is symbolic of the metaphysical *act* of creation. In turn this metaphysical act is manifest in the decidedly physical (*physic* = “becoming”) domain of spatio-temporal existence. We have already seen this to be so in the construction of the year. However, temporal existence is manifest existence and as such is inherently subject to the imperfection manifestation engenders through its very nature. Following this it is an observable fact that the spring equinox (March 21st) are never in the exact position in which they were in the year before. There is an annual lag of 50 seconds. In the course of 72 years this amounts to 1 degree ($50'' \times 72 = 3600'' = 60' = 1^\circ$). Consider the following:

1	year	= 50''
72	years	= 1°
2160	years	= 30° (1 sign of the zodiac)
25,920	years	= 360° (1 <i>Great or Platonic Year</i>)

From this we can see that the sum of actual years it takes to complete one equinoctial cycle of the zodiac (25,920 years) is equivalent to 360×72 . This demonstrates the relationship between 72 and the perfect cycle, as it is expressed in the temporal domain. Similarly, Schimmel observes,

... the division of the circle into 5 times 72 degrees does not produce the complete synodic orbit of Venus, but rather falls 2.41 degrees short of 8 complete circles. Thus, when exactly computed, the Istar pentagram is not completely closed. It is precisely this minute opening that, as Goethe has shown in *Faust*, enabled the powers of evil, Mephistopheles, to enter Faust's study.⁷⁵

With the first appearance of written tables there have been employed two systems of numeration, the decimal and the sexagesimal. These correspond to our earlier discussion of the numbers ten and twelve. The

⁷⁵ Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, 1993, p.108.

sexagesimal system was based on the *soos* (60), by which both circles and time are measured. Now if one complete cycle of manifest temporal existence (i.e. 25,920 years) is divided by one *soos* (i.e. the measure of spatial and temporal existence) the result is 432, the number we have already seen to represent this very mode of existence.

There are certain mythological occurrences of the figure of 432 that may be helpful to consider here. According to the Hindu doctrine of *Manvantāra* each *Mahāyuga* comprises 12,000 years. Each of these “years” is considered a divine Year, lasting 360 actual years. Hence, the life of a single cosmic cycle is 4,320,000 years (12,000 × 360). The *Kali Yuga*, which is to bring the *Manvantāra* to a close, is one-tenth this sum. Again, in the Icelandic Poetic Edda we learn that Odin’s heavenly warrior hall has 540 doors:

Five hundred doors and forty there are,
I ween, in Valhall’s walls;
Eight hundred fighters through each door fare
when to war with the Wolf they go.⁷⁶

The “war with the Wolf” here refers to the battle which signifies the end of each cosmic round. It will be noted that $540 \times 800 = 432,000$.

According to the Babylonian priest Berossos (c.280 B.C.) the sum of the ages of the Sumerian antediluvian kings is 432,000. This sets up an interesting comparison. The sum of the ages of the antediluvian patriarchs, in *Genesis* 5, is 1656 years. This appears at the outset to bear little relation to the number 432. However, the distinguished Jewish scholar, Julius Oppert (1825–1905), notes that both the figures 432,000 and 1656 contain 72 as a factor: $432,000 \div 72 = 6000$, and $1656 \div 72 = 23$. As such, he suggests a relationship between 6000 to 23. Oppert then explains that the Jewish calendar year is reckoned as 365 days, which in 23 years, plus the 5 leap-year days contained in such a period, amounts to 8400 days, or 1200 seven day weeks ($[365 \times 23] + 5 = 8400$; $8400 \div 7 = 1200$). The number of Jewish seven day weeks in 1656 years is then $1200 \times 72 = 86,400$. Now the Babylonian calendar year consists of 72×5 day weeks. In traditional calculations of this kind it was common practice to interchange references to both years and days. Following this practice, and if we count each

⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, tr. A. Faulkes, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1987, p.34.

Babylonian year as one day, then the number of Babylonian five day weeks in 432,000 days is 86,400 ($432,000 \div 5$). Hence there is established a relationship linking the five day week, the seven day week, and the completed cycle of spatial and temporal existence represented by the number 432. The number 72 is the basis of these relationships.



It remains to consider the relationship between the numbers 72 and 70, 71, and 73. As noted, the traditional understanding of time and space is cyclic. Now, the sacred or perfect year is comprised of 72×5 day weeks (36×10 ; 360) plus five intercalated “festival” days, *epagomeneia*, which belong neither to the old, nor the new, year. These five days, which exist *outside* time and space, indicate the return to the uncreated potential from whence a regenerated new creation is to be born. This period of five days represents a traditional understanding that recognises the first and last terms of a period as *unit*. This idea of the “unit-y” of the first and last periods of a cycle is expressed through the traditional hieroglyph of the ouroboros.

If we apply this logic to the Zodiac the first dodecan or decan of Aries coincides with the last dodecan or decan of Pisces; consequently instead of counting 36 decans or dodecans in the Zodiacal circle, there are 35. The first and last degree of the 36 dodecans in a single sign could also be counted as unit, in which case there are 35 degrees in each zodiacal sign. This shifts the emphasis of the symbolic calculations we considered above from 72 to 70 ($35 \times 10 = 350$; $35 \times 12 = 420$; $420 - 350 = 70$). Now, 72 represents the cycle, or process, of manifestation. It appears that 70 expresses this cycle with the recognition, and emphasis, on the prefigurement of this cycle within the point which is both its beginning and end (unit). Hence the number 70 symbolises the creative act from the point of view of the perfection of its potential. Let us further note that $70 \times 5 = 350$, $71 \times 5 = 355$, $72 \times 5 = 360$, and $73 \times 5 = 365$. The figure 71 provides the mean, or balance, between 70 (the point of manifestation embracing both the beginning and the end) and 72 (the *extension* of manifestation). If we consider the number 355 (71×5) in the form of a circle and apply the hieroglyph of the serpent swallowing one unit of its tail, then the resulting value is 354, which was the anciently accepted value of the lunar year. The number 365 (73×5) is the round value of the solar year. Note that 360 is the mean between 355 and 365 ($355 : 360 : 365$). The perfection of 360, or

the complete circle, indicates the perfection and balance between the lunar and the solar years. Hence, the numbers 70, 71, 72, and 73 are symbolic of the *creative* capacity in both its principle and all manifest expressions thereof.