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Is it an “algebra problem” if both the statement and the solution are given entirely in words? This question has been debated by historians studying the development of algebra and trying to decide on its origins. If symbolism is an essential facet of algebra, as some historians claim and as we normally teach algebra today, then it cannot be said to have begun much earlier than the beginning of the seventeenth century. So did Islamic mathematicians beginning in the ninth century actually do algebra, given that their work was entirely verbal? We will consider some aspects of the history of solving problems for unknown values in medieval Islam and in late medieval Europe and try to develop some reasonable answers to the above questions. In addition, we will look at the difficulties that “algebra in words” presented to Islamic mathematicians and raise the question as to whether the lack of symbolism in Islamic mathematics was in part responsible for its failure to develop further than it did. (Received September 03, 2012)