

# Words of Power

**The Institute of Ismaili Studies**  
**Shi'i Heritage Series, 3**

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# Words of Power

*Hurūfī Teachings between Shi'ism and  
Sufism in Medieval Islam*

*The Original Doctrine of Faḍl Allāh  
Astarābādī*

by

Orkhan Mir-Kasimov

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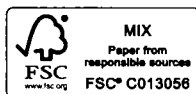
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## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Institute of Ismaili Studies was established in 1977 with the object of promoting scholarship and learning on Islam, in the historical as well as contemporary contexts, and a better understanding of its relationship with other societies and faiths.

The Institute's programmes encourage a perspective which is not confined to the theological and religious heritage of Islam, but seeks to explore the relationship of religious ideas to broader dimensions of society and culture. The programmes thus encourage an interdisciplinary approach to the materials of Islamic history and thought. Particular attention is also given to issues of modernity that arise as Muslims seek to relate their heritage to the contemporary situation.

Within the Islamic tradition, the Institute's programmes promote research on those areas which have, to date, received relatively little attention from scholars. These include the intellectual and literary expressions of Shi'ism in general, and Ismailism in particular.

In the context of Islamic societies, the Institute's programmes are informed by the full range and diversity of cultures in which Islam is practised today, from the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa to the industrialised societies of the West, thus taking into consideration the variety of contexts that shape the ideals, beliefs and practices of the faith.

These objectives are realised through concrete programmes and activities organised and implemented by various departments of the Institute. The Institute also collaborates periodically, on a programme-specific basis, with other institutions of learning in the United Kingdom and abroad.

The Institute's academic publications fall into a number of interrelated categories:

1. Occasional papers or essays addressing broad themes of the relationship between religion and society, with special reference to Islam.
2. Works exploring specific aspects of Islamic faith and culture, or the contributions of individual Muslim thinkers or writers.
3. Editions or translations of significant primary or secondary texts.
4. Translations of poetic or literary texts that illustrate the rich heritage of spiritual, devotional and symbolic expressions in Muslim history.
5. Works on Ismaili history and thought, and the relationship of the Ismailis to other traditions, communities and schools of thought in Islam.
6. Proceedings of conferences and seminars sponsored by the Institute.
7. Bibliographical works and catalogues that document manuscripts, printed texts and other source materials.

This book falls into category two listed above.

In facilitating these and other publications, the Institute's sole aim is to encourage original research and analysis of relevant issues. While every effort is made to ensure that the publications are of a high academic standard, there is naturally bound to be a diversity of views, ideas and interpretations. As such, the opinions expressed in these publications must be understood as belonging to their authors alone.

## *Shi'i Heritage Series*

Shi'i Muslims, with their rich intellectual and cultural heritage, have contributed significantly to the fecundity and diversity of the Islamic traditions throughout the centuries, enabling Islam to evolve and flourish both as a major religion and also as a civilisation. In spite of this, Shi'i Islam has received little scholarly attention in the West, either in medieval or modern times. It is only in recent decades that academic interest has focused increasingly on Shi'i Islam within the wider study of Islam.

The principal objective of the *Shi'i Heritage Series*, launched by The Institute of Ismaili Studies, is to enhance general knowledge of Shi'i Islam and promote a better understanding of its history, doctrines and practices in their historical and contemporary manifestations. Addressing all Shi'i communities, the series also aims to engage in discussions on theoretical and methodological issues, while inspiring further research in the field.

Works published in this series include monographs, collective volumes, editions and translations of primary texts, and bibliographical projects, bringing together some of the most significant themes in the study of Shi'i Islam through an interdisciplinary approach, and making them accessible to a wide readership.

*To the memory of my grandparents*



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## Note on Transliteration and Conventions

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian in this book follows the rules of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, with some modifications: *j* instead of *dj*, *ch* instead of *č*, *q* instead of *ķ*. Turkish transliteration conforms to modern Turkish orthography.

Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of all Qur'ānic verses follows that of A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, occasionally with some modifications required by the context.

Qur'ānic verse references are given in the text. References of *ḥadīths* and biblical citations are summarised, in alphabetical order, in Inventories I and II. The footnotes in the main text specify the entry number in the relevant Inventory.

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations in Parts One to Three are from the manuscript British Library Oc.Or.5957 of the *Jāwidān-nāma-yi kabīr*, the *magnum opus* of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī, known also, with reference to its incipit, as the *Jāwidān-nāma-yi shish ibtidā'*.

The original Persian text of the long citations from the *Jāwidān-nāma* and the works of Faḍl Allāh's followers is included at the end of the book. In order to facilitate the location of the original text of any particular citation, the Persian text of citations is arranged according to the numbers of the corresponding folios.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

When, in the mid-1990s, I came to Paris with a small book of 'Imād al-Din Nasīmī's poetry in my pocket, I could not have known that it would take me on a long and surprising journey.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I nearly forgot this book for the next few years, overtaken by work on another project. However, when the time came to choose the topic for my Master's dissertation, Nasīmī's poetry suddenly came back to my mind, singing its strange distiches. These verses from the 9th/15th century had an almost post-modernist ring to them, with their resonant lines reverberating the same phoneme or syllable several times, then suddenly flowing into beautiful, powerful words and rhymes. I knew next to nothing about Nasīmī, except that he was a courageous man who died flayed alive. I knew still less about his intellectual and spiritual background. The short introduction to his book of poetry mentioned a group called Ḥurūfīs and a certain Faḍl Allāh from Astarābād, their leader, whose teachings would have much

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<sup>1</sup> Nasīmī (d. 820/1417–1418), the famous poet and legendary figure, especially in the Turkic world was, during a certain period, one of the closest followers of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī, the founder of the Ḥurūfī movement. For the general information about Nasīmī, see F. Babinger, 'Nesimī', *EI2*, vol. 8, p. 8, and A. Gölpınarlı, 'Nesimī', *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul, 1960), vol. 9, pp. 206–207. A more detailed account on his life and works can be found in 'A. Mirfetrov, *Zindagi, ash'ar wa 'aqā'id-i Nasimī, shā'ir wa mutafakkir-i hurūfī* ([Stockholm?], 1992); Kathleen R. F. Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi, Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi* (The Hague and Paris, 1972) and B. S. Amoretti, 'Caratteristiche hurufite del divano persiano di Nesimi', *Studi Iranici* 17 (1977), pp. 267–285. For Nasīmī's influence in the Arab world, see H. T. Norris, 'Aspects of the Influence of Nesimī's Hurufi Verse, and his Martyrdom, in the Arab East between the 16th and 18th Centuries', in G. Veinstein, ed., *Syncretismes et hérésies dans l'Orient seldjoukide et ottoman (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris, 2005), pp. 163–182, and on Nasīmī as a figure of Ḥallājīan legend, see L. Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn ibn Mansūr Hallāj* (Paris, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 261–268.

influenced Nasīmī. But who were the Ḥurūfis and what kind of teachings found expression in Nasīmī's poetry?

When I mentioned these questions in a conversation with Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, my supervisor at that time, I did not seriously consider them as a possible topic for academic work. After all, Nasīmī was a famous poet and I was sure that his own works and anything related to them had been thoroughly researched long ago. I only expected some references from my erudite professor. I was surprised to hear that most of the Ḥurūfī texts had not yet been published, and that the primary sources of Ḥurūfī thought, the works of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī himself, were still little known. This is how I found myself studying the few published Ḥurūfī works for my Master's dissertation, then embarking on the work on Faḍl Allāh's *magnum opus*, the *Jāwidān-nāma-yi kabīr*, the 'Great Book of Eternity', for my Ph.D.<sup>2</sup>

I will not dwell here on the particular features of the *Jāwidān-nāma* as a text; they are described further below in the Introduction. It should be mentioned, however, that the *Jāwidān-nāma* does not contain any systematic presentation of the doctrine. It is essentially a huge corpus of fragments. The main purpose of the present book is to produce a comprehensive presentation of the central doctrinal lines of the *Jāwidān-nāma*, such as they appear from the analytical study of the relevant fragments.

The Introduction begins with a general outline of Faḍl Allāh's spiritual career and of Ḥurūfī history after his death. It also contains a discussion of the significance of Faḍl Allāh's ideas in the context of intense transformation that the Eastern Islamic world underwent in the period between the Mongol invasion and the consolidation of the Ottoman, Ṣafawid and Mughal empires. A separate section of the Introduction summarises the history of academic research on the Ḥurūfis. It is followed by some methodological remarks directly related to the assessment of the existing research, its achievements, its shortcomings and the place of the present book therein. Methodological observations are continued in the last section of the

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<sup>2</sup> O. Mir-Kasimov, 'Etude de textes ḥurūfī anciens: l'oeuvre fondatrice de Faḍlallāh Astarābādī' (Paris, 2007).

Introduction, with a particular focus on the structural particularities of the *Jāwidān-nāma*.

The next three parts of the book (Chapters 1 to 13) deal with aspects of Faḍl Allāh's doctrine such as it can be restored from the body of fragments. Part One (Chapters 1 to 6) brings together cosmogonical and cosmological doctrines of the *Jāwidān-nāma*. These doctrines are centred on the specific conception of the ontological divine Word. The creation and temporal evolution of the universe are described as a kind of metaphysical linguistics, with its semantics (Chapter 1), morphology (Chapter 2) and syntax (Chapters 3, 5 and 6). Within this presentation, the Human Being, Time and Universe appear as differentiated equivalents of the original Word, essentially identical to each other because they are produced in accordance with the same primary model. The Excursus (Chapter 4) focuses more particularly on knowledge and love, two pivotal elements of the *Jāwidān-nāma*'s anthropology. Part Two (Chapters 7 to 11) is devoted to the *Jāwidān-nāma*'s prophetology, that is, the progressive revelation (*tanzīl*) of the original divine Word through prophetic missions and its return to the origin (*ta'wīl*) at the end of time. The central themes of this part are the relationship between divine and human languages, and the theory of *ta'wīl*, which is the core doctrine of the whole work. Related to the latter is the theory of the 'motherly' (*ummī*) knowledge, and the 'motherly' prophets and saints, which seems to be an original development (Chapter 10), interestingly combining mainstream Sunni prophetology and eschatology with Shi'i ideas concerning the role of the Imāms and their saintly investiture, the *walāya*. Part Three (Chapters 12 and 13) deal respectively with the ways of individual and collective salvation, including the *Jāwidān-nāma*'s eschatological views. The Conclusion contains a preliminary examination, based on the contents of the *Jāwidān-nāma*, especially concerning the place of Faḍl Allāh's eclectic thought in the landscape of Muslim intellectual and spiritual currents, and a reflection, also based on the textual evidence of *Jāwidān-nāma*, on the possible messianic project of Faḍl Allāh, his approach to the reunification of the Muslim community, and reactualisation of the universal message of Islam addressed to mankind as a whole, in particular to Jews and Christians. This last purpose can arguably be discerned behind Faḍl Allāh's extensive use of canonical biblical texts

and apocrypha, which constitutes one of the most intriguing features of the *Jāwidān-nāma*.

It is impossible to mention here all friends and colleagues who contributed, in one way or another, to the maturation of this book over many years. It is my pleasure to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, my thesis adviser and dear friend. All members of my Ph.D. committee – Denise Aigle, Denis Gril and Thierry Zarcone – contributed, in different ways, to the development of my postdoctoral projects. My sincere thanks to Shahzad Bashir, for stimulating exchanges and for kindly sharing with me his copies of Ḥurūfī manuscripts. Meetings and conversations with Frédéric Gabriel, Asma Hilali and Lahcen Daaif ever renewed the chevaleresque ideal of the ‘search for knowledge’. Hassan Ansari and Daniel De Smet were always helpful and generously shared their impressive erudition. Discussions with Pierre Legendre, who was generous with his time when discussing my book project, were crucial for my understanding of academic book writing. Jean-Daniel Dubois, Anna van den Kerchove and Simon Mimouni helped me to find relevant Jewish and Christian parallels to some specific doctrinal positions of the *Jāwidān-nāma*. Saïd Amir Arjomand, Kathryn Babayan, Gerhard Böwering, William Chittick, Patricia Crone, Devin DeWeese, Pierre Lory and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak provided valuable suggestions and encouragement at the early stages of the work on this book.

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