Words of Power: Ḥurūfī Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam: The Original Doctrine of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī

Orkhan Mir-Kasimov
London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015. 590 pages.

The study of Islamic intellectual history, while existing in pockets of scholarship before, has increasingly become a dominant aspect of the study of Islam. We have moved from some piecemeal approaches to the classical period to a more carefully nuanced and thick understanding of the middle period, that critical time from the wane of the Abbasids to the rise of the Gunpowder Empires. In particular, the "Chicago school" has expended a great deal of effort in making sense of the critical messianic moment from around the time of Timur (1336-1405), the "lord of the junction," to the "messianic sovereigns" of the Timurid and later Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires.

The book under review concerns one of the key intellectual developments of that period, namely, esoteric political theology and lettrism (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*), which later informed similar developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It gives us one, albeit marginal and rather antinomian, glimpse into the importance of the esoteric and occult learning that was a critical element of the scholarly underground even among elites throughout the middle and early modern periods in the world of Islam. Mir-Kasimov's magisterial and highly textual study of Fazlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394) and his Hurufiyyah movement, neither mainstream Shi'i nor Alid-loyalist Sufis nor even complete esotericists beyond the pale of Islam, contributes to the processes by which elite discourses on hermeneutics of reading the word and the world filtered into more subaltern and vernacular understandings of the cosmos and the human within and the divine both within and without.

It is, therefore, no accident that the careful lettrist calculations that place letters as primordial signifiers and producers of the cosmos, along with their manipulation to make sense of the cosmos and wield power and their role in the folding up of the cosmos, focused upon the Persian alphabet and vernacular. After all, lettrism need not be confined to learned disquisitions on the letters of a particular language, such as Arabic. However, unlike other forms of lettrism found in the Ikhwan al-Safa' or al-Buni and others, there is something peculiarly transgressive about Astarabadi's insistence on Persian's primordial nature.

In recent years, Shahzad Bashir and others have contributed to our understanding of this movement, not least motivated by the desire to make sense of Sufism's varying manifestations during the messianic moment and its relationship with forms of Shi'ism or Alid loyalism. For those who are interested in these processes and how they impinge upon vernacular learning, Mir-Kasimov's study is essential. Most importantly, by insisting that he is studying the "original" teaching while holding one hostage to a certain hubris, he is nevertheless differentiating the later reception and understanding of Astarabadi from his doctrine and critically separating his particular movement from the wider trend of lettrism that existed during the Persianate world's middle period.

The book itself is divided into an introduction (the sources and a literature review); three parts on the cosmology and cosmogony of language, prophetology as the descent of the logos and process of reversion to God, and soteriology and eschatology; and a final conclusion that attempts to contextualize the Hurufiyyah in Islamic intellectual history. I would have liked to have seen far more discussion of the sources and the problems one might face in their analysis and distinction. Quite often one feels that the individual sections and even their internal chapters stand alone, for the book reads somewhat like a series of broadly congruous but distinct articles on specific aspects of Astarabadi's thought. In addition, the introduction and conclusion could have done far more to provide sufficient background, connectors, and contexts for those unfamiliar with the subject. Nevertheless, the detail, the careful philology (given that the language of the texts is usually a Khurasani/Astarabadi vernacular of Persian), the manuscript work, and the coverage will make this the major reference for anyone interested in the Hurufiyyah as a movement and its members' intellectual and political intersections.

The introduction presents these topics within the messianic turn, provides a literature review of their study, and deals with the difficulties of their texts – not least the *Jāvīdān-nāma*. On a small side note, I realize that transliteration is not necessarily an exact science, but the Institute of Ismaili Studies' insistence on rendering Persian as if it were Arabic is rather tedious. Hence I prefer *Jāvīdān-nāma* to *Jāwīdān-nāma* and Faẓlallāh to Faḍl Allāh. Mir-Kasimov provides some useful appendices on key terms, an inventory of texts found in the works that help readers contextualize the sources, as well as preliminary transcriptions of the Persian texts used. There is little doubt that this will become the main resource for our understanding of Hurufism, even if some of the more recent studies in Persian are more "historical." Most of the chapters are careful and close readings of the text (with copious translated passages that could be fruitfully used in class), and only in the conclusion does he return

to the wider picture of how Astarabadi relates to tendencies in esotericism, especially of the Shi'i varieties.

The text follows the drama of the *Jāwīdān-nāma* as the descent of the word from the One, its manifestation in prophecy, and its soteriological return. Surprisingly, given Astarabadi's own messianic role, there is little discussion on *walāyah*, which is such a central concept in different esotericisms, even if the other key notion of such approaches to text, namely, *ta'wīl*, is much analyzed. Part 1, on the cosmogony and cosmology, begins with the problem of creation: How does multiplicity arise from unity, and how does the immaterial produce a material cosmos? It then moves on to key aspects of the cosmos – the engendering of the human being with the narrative of Adam and Eve, as well as space and time and how in its very diversity the multiple universe is united by the word. In the scheme of the school of Ibn Arabi and his later Shi'i interpreters, existence is a singular reality in which diversity is not mere phenomenal illusion, but rather constitutes the very stuff of a modulated and hierarchically arranged pyramid of being, a doctrine they called *tashkīk al-wujūd*. For Astarabadi, there seems to be a similar ontological description, but with the word taking the place of existence; it is the word that is one and many.

The footnotes make some brief comparisons with Hellenic neoplatonisms, but more interesting are some of the parallels and clear references to Christian apocrypha, especially those of the Gnostic type. I would like to know if there are any references to hermetica that would be appropriate, but nothing mentioned in this regard. The centrality of the notion of the correspondences and the balance in the cosmos recalls both the Ikhwan al-Safa' and Jabir ibn Hayyan; however, the parallels are not analyzed. The ultimate homology is between God and His form in Adam – although it is the first human couple who fully manifest the divine, since for Astarabadi Eve is the form of Adam. There is no strict precedence of the male. Adam is the divine throne and Eve is the footstool, and together they ensure the perpetuation of the balance. Similarly, Adam is the soul of the word manifest whereas Eve is its very existence. Their bodies are the preserved tablet and the "mother of the book," the essence of revelation. Astarabadi constantly refers to the esoteric sayings of Ali as the primordial Adam. Insofar as Adam/Ali is the perfect word of God and all things, he takes the place of the Sufi tradition's "perfect man."

Part 2, on prophetology, includes a number of esoteric contemplations of particular prophets as exemplifying the word's descent and course in this world and its indication toward the reversion to God. As the short excursus in part 1 suggested, knowledge and love are the two motivations for the word's descent as well as for the process for its reversion. Prophets take the word and fragment

it into the expressions of human language; but they also provide the tools for its re-integration through *ta'wīl*. A short chapter 9 discusses the three famous examples of this later: Joseph, Moses, and Solomon. Jesus and Muhammad reflect a more direct revelation and reversion of the word – the taking up into heaven of the former, and the ascension (*mi'rāj*) of the latter.

Part 3, on soteriology, comprises a remarkably short discussion of gnostic salvation (the salvific efficacy of knowledge overcoming ignorance), the end of times, and the relative roles of the initiated and the uninitiated. Perhaps it is not paradoxical that a messianic movement shows little interest in the world to come precisely because it seems, in its theological and politically radical moment, to be invested in the ever present. The fall from the edenic state was related in part 1 to the oblivion of the complete word of God and the meaning inscribed on the bodies of Adam and Eve. The return or the reversal of the fall therefore requires, through *ta'wīl*, an enlightenment of that word and the realization of the self that comes at the end of the religious dispensation brought by Muhammad and culminating in Astarabadi. Those who fail to achieve this enlightenment will join Satan in his ignorance and fiery nature and become the hellfire in which they will dwell.

This section contains a further consideration of Ali's role at the end of the religious dispensation. Adam's fall reflects the reduction of the thirty-two primordial words into twenty-eight; it is Ali who returns the four key words for the integration and reversion of the word at the end of time. There is little that is explicitly Imami or Twelver Shi'i in the text, although Mir-Kasimov suggests that this might be due to the changing context under Shahrukh and the reception of the text.

Given the chapters' very detailed nature, the conclusion plays a critical role in allowing us to distinguish the woods from the trees. A question that remains is how did Astarabadi see himself? Can one see the *Jāwīdān-nāma* as an act of *ta'wīl* on the Qur'an or as a work of revelation in its own right? To what extent does he draw upon existing lettrism and esoteric interpretations, and how is his legacy received? Mir-Kasimov discusses the links with the school of Ibn Arabi, even if there is little explicitly from the master himself; there is a discussion of the superiority of *walāyah* over prophecy and some ambiguity over the nature of the seal of saints – more explicitly Shi'i contemporaries such as Sayyid Haydar Amuli, who followed Hamyya and Kashani on identifying the figure with the Twelver Mahdi. Astarabadi, however, was more circumspect.

The problem of contextualization is raised because Astarabadi's milieu included the school of Ibn Arabi, Ismailism, and other trends of esoteric Shi'i

Islam such as Rajab Bursi. Mir-Kasimov suggests that instead to tying him to a particular Shi'i trend, one can see in his work the same revival of early esoteric Shi'ism found in both Twelver and Ismaili works. Certainly matters are complicated by some later Hurufis who took a more markedly Twelver approach. We know that others attracted to esotericism and lettrism immediately afterward, such as Sa'in al-Din ibn Turka, rejected Astarabadi while using some of the same techniques. Rightly, the author suggests that there is far more to research on the legacy and reception of Astarabadi – perhaps a follow up volume?

In many ways, Mir-Kasimov has provided it with a critical sourcebook on a major figure of esotericism during the middle period Persianate Islam. Thus it is up to those reading the work to follow up on the contexts and connections with other trends of the period, especially during the great messianic turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Bashir's work is a much better integrated introduction, but in this work we have a far more deeply textual work that can complement it. However, the work still leaves me somewhat baffled by the problem of esotericism and particularly esoteric Shi'ism during that specific period.

Sajjad Rizvi
Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History
University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom