1. Introduction: the Conception of “Motherly” (Ummī)
Knowledge in the Jāwidān-Nāma of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394)

When he was close to the age of forty years, the secrets of the single letters at the beginning of the [Qurʾānic] suras [were revealed to him], [the letters] which [constitute] the heavenly book sent by God to Adam… He thus became a [spiritual] master and teacher. His doctrine (iʿtiqād) was therefore based on divine revelation (kashf-i ilāhī)… This revelation [also] concerned the secrets, truths and degrees (asrār wa ḥaqāʾiq wa maqāmāt) of Muḥammad… [He heard a voice] asking: who is this young man? Who is this moon of earth and heaven?—The answer was: He is the Master of Time, and the King of all prophets (sayyid-i zamānast sulṭān-i hama payghambarānast). Other people acquire their knowledge (iʿtiqād) of the eminence of Muḥammad’s degrees through blind imitation and through explanations provided by someone else (ba-taqlīd wa bayān-i dīgarān), but he received this knowledge through [direct] revelation and contemplation (kashf wa ʿiyān).1

In the year 775[/1374]… the knowledge of the spiritual exegesis of the single letters of the Qurʾān (ʿilm-i taʾwīl-i muqaṭṭāt-i Qurʾān), as well as the secrets of the religious law (asrār-i din-i sharīʿa), such as prayer and fasting, were revealed (kashf) to him.2

This is how the disciples of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394) describe the central experience, which determined both the doctrinal production of Faḍl Allāh and the socio-political orientation of the movement that he founded.

From the cited passages, it can be concluded that Faḍl Allāh claimed to have received a personal revelation that endowed him with a status close to the prophetic degree and disclosed to him the paths of spiritual

1 Nafājī, Khwāb-nāma 66a, 68a–69b. For the German summary and partial translation of these passages see Ritter, Ḥurufīsekte 20. For an English translation slightly different from mine, see Bashir, Fazlallah 25–26.
2 Sayyid Ishāq Astarābādī, Khwāb-nāma 19b.
exegesis leading to the innermost meaning of the Muḥammad’s prophetic message. This revelation gave Faḍl Allāh a specific vantage point on the contemporary situation of Islamic religious dogma and on the direction of its further development. He exposed his views in several works, the most important of which is the Jāwidān-nāma (the “Book of Eternity”). The Jāwidān-nāma is the foundational work of this movement, which came to be known, mainly through its descriptions in external sources, under the name of Ḥurūfīyya. Along with some other works of Faḍl Allāh, this work was considered by his followers to be divinely inspired (Jāwidān-nāma-yi ilāhi).

Conversely to what could be expected, the Jāwidān-nāma does not contain any systematic presentation of Faḍl Allāh’s thought. It is rather a voluminous corpus of fragments, which follow each other without any thematic organization. The fragments cover nearly all the central topics of medieval religious thought, including cosmology, anthropology, prophetology and eschatology. One of the central characteristics of the Jāwidān-nāma is its free, creative, and in some cases surprisingly unusual interpretation of scriptural material, which includes not only the Qur’ān and hadīth, but also Biblical texts and apocrypha. However, contrary to the opinions expressed in anti-Ḥurūfī polemics, sometimes uncritically adopted by modern scholars, the Jāwidān-nāma does not seem to contain any theory that is explicitly opposed to the majority dogma. On the contrary, the text arguably bears traces of an effort reconciling the competing currents of contemporary Islam, mainly focused on the Sunni/Shīʿī rapprochement, characteristic of the post-Mongol Iranian context. As an