



THE EVIDENTIARY AUTHORITY OF SOLITARY REPORTS IN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY (‘AQĪDAH)

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Abstract

This article examines the issue of the evidentiary authority of solitary reports (khabar al-āḥād) in Islamic theology (‘aqīdah), with particular reference to the Māturīdī school. It analyzes the definitions and foundations of the science of ‘aqīdah, the role of rational (‘aqlī) and transmitted (sam‘ī) evidences, and the classification of beliefs into definitive (qaṭ‘ī) and probable (ẓannī) categories. The study highlights scholarly debates regarding the acceptance of solitary reports in creedal matters and clarifies that their rejection is not absolute but context – dependent. Drawing on classical theological sources, the article demonstrates that solitary reports have been widely used in discussions of non-essential creedal issues, especially in matters related to the unseen (sam‘iyyāt). It concludes that while solitary reports do not yield absolute certainty, they retain evidentiary value and play a significant role in the structure of Islamic belief.

Keywords: Islamic theology, ‘aqīdah, solitary reports, khabar al-āḥād, Māturīdī school, evidence (dalīl), qaṭ‘ī and ẓannī knowledge, kalām, sam‘iyyāt, hadith studies, belief, disbelief.

Introduction

The term “‘aqīda” is a loanword derived from the Arabic language, originating from the verb ‘aqada (عقد). In Arabic, ‘aqada is used to denote something that is firmly bound or tied. Depending on its combination with other words, this verb conveys meanings such as firmness, solidity, cohesion, and adherence or commitment. The noun ‘aqīda (عقيدة) is derived from the verb ‘aqada (عقد) and is



used to denote “a judgment that admits no doubt.” (Umar, 2008, p. 2800) Its plural form is ‘aqā’id (عقائد). In terminological usage, ‘aqā’id refers to the body of religious doctrines to which the heart must firmly adhere – that is, the set of beliefs that must be held with conviction and unwavering commitment. Belief is an inward, heart-based concept that may be either true or false. The totality of the doctrines that a Muslim is required to believe in is referred to as ‘aqā’id. The discipline that examines the derivation of doctrinal judgments and studies matters of creed is known as the “science of ‘aqīda”.

The main part

Numerous definitions have been proposed for the science of ‘aqīda, also known as ‘ilm al-kalām. In his work “Falsafat ‘Ilm al-Kalām”, Dr. ‘Alī al-‘Umarī explains the multiplicity of these definitions as follows: “The اختلاف (variation) in scholars’ definitions of ‘ilm al-kalām arises from their differing general and particular perspectives on this discipline. Each researcher has approached its definition in accordance with his own methodological orientation. Some scholars have focused on the subject (agent) of the science in their definitions, while others have directed their attention to its object.” (Al-‘Umari, 2020, p. 187)

The earliest definition of the science of ‘aqīda can be found in the work “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” by Imām Abū Ḥanīfa (may Allah have mercy on him):

والفقه هو معرفة النفس ما لها وما عليها وما يتعلق منها بالإعتقاد

“Fiqh is a person’s ability to discern what is beneficial and what is harmful for oneself, and, among these, to know those matters that pertain to belief.” (Al-Bayazi al-Hanafi, 1949, p. 15)

Although this definition was originally articulated with reference to fiqh, it may be said to encompass the science of ‘aqīda as well. Indeed, Imām Abū Ḥanīfa referred to the science of creed (‘aqīda) as “the greater fiqh” (al-fiqh al-akbar). From this, it is understood that the practical legal rulings of the Sharī‘a constitute the “lesser fiqh,” subsumed under the broader and more comprehensive category of the greater fiqh. Judging from the title of the work, “al-Fiqh al-Akbar” (“The Greater Fiqh”), the definition it contains encompasses both the sciences of ‘aqīda and fiqh. Indeed, the phrase “a person’s ability to discern what is beneficial for



oneself” indicates that such discernment falls under the category of the *mubāh* (permissible) ruling. From this, it may be inferred that this particular ruling does not pertain to the domain of the science of ‘*aqīda*. Accordingly, it can be observed that later Ḥanafī scholars, among them Kamāl ibn al-Humām (may Allah have mercy on him), adapted Abū Ḥanīfa’s definition specifically to the science of ‘*aqīda* by omitting the phrase *mā lahā* from the original formulation. He thus defined ‘*aqīda* as follows:

الكلام معرفة النفس ما عليها من العقائد المنسوبة إلى دين الإسلام عن الأدلة، علما، وظنا في البعض
منها

“The science of *kalām* is the discipline through which a person acquires precise knowledge, based on evidence, of the creedal beliefs incumbent upon them in Islam, while regarding certain beliefs as *ẓannī* (probable or highly likely) rather than certain”. (Ibn Abi Sharif, 2002, p. 54)

By analyzing the definition step by step, one can gain a detailed understanding of questions such as: “What kind of science is ‘*aqā’id*?”, “Why is evidence necessary?”, and “What type of evidence is required in the science of ‘*aqā’id*?”

The phrase “**a person knows the beliefs incumbent upon them**” refers to obligations in the realm of creed. The expression “incumbent upon” denotes, in terms of Shar‘ī rulings, the ruling of *wājib*. In Islamic jurisprudence, a *wājib* act is one that a believer is required to perform; failure to fulfill it incurs serious accountability or sanction. In the science of ‘*aqā’id*, matters considered essential or foundational to the religion are classified as *wājib*. A person who denies an action or belief carrying this ruling is regarded as committing disbelief. When does something become *wājib* upon a person? It becomes obligatory when the individual possesses reason and has reached maturity (*bulūgh*). Such a person is termed *mukallaf*, meaning “one upon whom the obligations of religion are prescribed.” Once a person is rational and mature, they are required to understand the obligations of their religion and to strive to know what is incumbent upon them in matters of faith.



“Knowing the beliefs belonging to Islam”. As noted, the term ‘aqīda signifies “belief” or “conviction” (i’tiqād). Beliefs can be classified into religious, customary, and rational types. The term i’tiqād is applied broadly to any conviction to which a person’s heart is firmly attached, regardless of its nature. Thus, a person may even hold a belief in something unrelated to religion. In Islam, such practices are termed bid‘ah (innovation). A person may also firmly attach their heart to a custom or practice of a particular community and perform it in the manner of belief. This demonstrates that i’tiqād (belief) is a general concept, and its specification as belonging to Islam is derived from this general notion. Therefore, a mukallaf – a person who is accountable under Islamic law – must know the beliefs that the religion has made obligatory. These beliefs (‘aqā’id) can be known either through evidence (dalīl) or without it. A person who seeks to know them without resorting to evidence is called a muqallid – that is, a “follower” or “imitator.” A muqallid is one who adheres to the conclusions of a rightly-guided mujtahid (a qualified jurist or scholar) rather than deriving religious rulings independently. The muqallid does not study religion through evidence, because only those well-versed in knowledge (‘ilm) are capable of understanding and applying the proofs themselves. For this reason, studying the science with its evidences is considered a farḍ kifāyah – a communal obligation. A farḍ kifāyah is an act that, if performed by some members of the community, absolves the rest from the duty. Since the muqallid follows a mujtahid who is well-versed in the evidences, the muqallid’s adherence to creed is regarded as correct and valid. If a person follows no one and relies on no evidence, they are left to depend solely on their own reason. However, reason alone does not always lead to the correct path, because it can only contemplate what falls within its capacity. Even for reason to function correctly, a guiding standard is required. That standard is the Sharī‘a – the divine law and religion – which serves as the measure for correct understanding and judgment.

“Knowing through evidences”. Evidences can be either detailed or concise. For the general public, familiarity with the concise, mujmal evidences is sufficient to establish faith. If this is inadequate, a person must study the detailed proofs to strengthen their belief. As for ‘aqā’id, the detailed and extensive evidences are



the domain of specialists and scholars, who are required to examine them thoroughly.

The eminent scholar known by the title “The Proof of Islam,” Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (may Allah have mercy on him), in his work “Kitāb al-Iqtīṣād”, asserts that it is wājib (obligatory) for beliefs (‘aqā’id) to be confirmed according to the strength and level of their evidences.

ثم كلما ورد السمع به ينظر، فإن كان العقل مجوزاً له وجب التصديق به قطعاً إن كانت الأدلة السمعية

قاطعة في متنها ومستندها لا يتطرق إليها احتمال، وجب التصديق بها ظناً إن كانت ظنية

“Every piece of information received through hearing is subjected to rational analysis. If reason deems it permissible and the textual evidences (sam‘ī dalīl) – both in wording and chain of transmission – are definitive and leave no room for doubt, then it becomes wājib to affirm it with certainty. If the textual evidence is received through a probable (ẓannī) route, then it becomes wājib to affirm it with corresponding probability (ẓannī affirmation).” (Al-Ghazali, n.d., p. 95)

Although these statements specifically pertain to the chapter of Ghaybiyyāt (matters of the unseen) within the science of ‘aqā’id, a general principle can be derived: if a report that reason considers permissible (jawāzī) arrives through definitive evidence (qaṭ‘ī dalīl), it becomes wājib to affirm it with certainty. Conversely, if a report that reason considers permissible arrives through probable evidence (ẓannī dalīl), it becomes wājib to affirm it with corresponding probability. Thus, in accordance with the type of evidence, ‘aqā’id can be classified into definitive (qaṭ‘ī) and probable (ẓannī) categories.

One of the prominent scholars of the Māturīdiyya school, Najmuddīn ‘Umar al-Nasafī (d. 537 AH, may Allah have mercy on him), in his work “‘Aqā’id”, outlines several reasons why this discipline is called the “science of Kalām.” In this context, he also emphasizes that ‘aqā’id must be established upon definitive (qaṭ‘ī) evidences:

ولأنه لا يثبت على الأدلة القطعية المؤيد أكثرها بالأدلة السمعية

“The science of Kalām is primarily supported by textual (sam‘ī) evidences, and it is built upon rational, definitive (qaṭ‘ī) proofs; for this reason, it is called the ‘science of Kalām.” (Al-Hanafi, 2010, p. 21)



Here, the discussion pertains to the essence of ‘aqīda itself. In Ibn Ḥumām’s definition, acknowledging that ‘aqīda includes both its essential core and supplementary beliefs, he states that some of the evidences for these supplementary **beliefs may be ḡannī (probable or highly likely)**.

Summarizing the points mentioned, it becomes clear that ‘aqā’id are derived from definitive evidences, and absolute certainty in belief is only warranted when the evidence is supported by conclusive textual proof (sam’ī). The use of the term “most” (aksari) indicates that not all evidences are necessarily certain. Imām Taftāzānī, in his work Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id, further emphasizes that the definitive evidences must also be rational (‘aqlī). (Kastali al-Khayali, 2012, p. 76) That is, the evidence must not contradict reason. The phrase “built upon” (ustiga bino qilingan) is understood as “foundation” (asos) or “essence” (asl). In Sharī‘a sciences, the plural of “essence” is referred to as usūl – that is, the foundational principles or basic rules that support and uphold ‘aqīda are derived from the combination of two types of evidence:

- Rational evidences (‘aqlī dalīl);
- Evidences supported by the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, and Ijmā‘ (these are called sam’ī or textual evidences).

In matters of ‘aqā’id, what is considered yaqīn (certain or near-certain) holds significant weight, and it is necessary to provide definitive proofs (burhān) for creedal issues. (Umar, 2008, p. 197)

In Arabic, a definitive proof is called a burhān. The word burhān originally comes from Persian and, in the lexicon, means “to cut off” or “to separate.” It is used to denote “a decisive proof,” “evidence free from any doubt,” “a ruling derived from universally accepted premises,” or “a certain conclusion reached through reasoning from certain premises”. (Umar, 2008, p. 764)

The term dalīl refers to “a guide or indicator that one follows in action”. Similarly, markers placed to help travelers find their way are also called dalīl. (Umar, 2008, p. 444) From the lexical meanings of burhān and dalīl, it is evident that dalīl is used in a much broader sense. Anything that directs someone toward a particular path or objective can be referred to as a dalīl. The term burhān is used when a proof is decisive and definitive. Another related term is ḡujjah, which literally means “to rely upon something” or “to base a claim on something” – that is, to



advance an argument by referring to a supporting basis. (Umar, 2008, p. 444) This word can be used interchangeably with *dalīl* and *burhān*. The distinctive feature of *ḥujjah* is that in debates or disputes, it refers to a type of evidence that the opponent cannot refute. The term *isbāt* (“proof” or “demonstration”) is used as a synonym for all the aforementioned forms of argument.

Discussion

In the science of ‘*aqā’id*, the issue of whether solitary reports (*akhbār ahād*) can serve as valid evidence has been the subject of extensive debate. Some scholars have stated that “in matters of ‘*aqā’id*, solitary reports are not considered authoritative evidence”. If these statements are interpreted absolutely, without any contextual qualifications, they have sometimes provoked harsh criticism and censure from others.

In the science of ‘*aqā’id*, solitary reports (*akhbār ahād*) have been used as valid evidence in various contexts. For example, in the chapter on *Asmā’ al-Ḥusnā* (“the Names of Allāh”), in the discussion of *mu’jizāt* (miracles) of the Prophet (*nabī alayhi al-salām*) within the chapter on Prophethood, and in the chapter on *sam’iyyāt* (matters known through revelation or hearing) – including topics such as the *mīzān* (scale of deeds), the *ṣirāt*, the questioning in the grave, and the descriptions of Paradise and Hell – solitary reports are treated as authoritative evidence. References to this practice can be found in virtually all classical works on ‘*aqā’id*. In fact, even those scholars who reportedly denied the authority of solitary reports (*akhbār ahād*) in ‘*aqā’id* themselves used such reports as evidence in the chapter on *sam’iyyāt*. The main problem arises when these statements are cited superficially, without proper study or contextual understanding. Due to the widespread circulation of the claim that solitary reports are not sufficient as proof in ‘*aqā’id*, some have mistakenly concluded that even if an *akhbār ahād* is authentic, it can never serve as valid evidence in matters of creed. The emergence of such a conclusion is due to the extensive discussion of this topic by the *mutakallimīn* (theologians). Those who lacked expertise in the science failed to understand the contextual nuance of these statements. (Al-Ghursi, 2024, p. 96) Shaykh ‘Abdulḥayy Lakhnawī, in his work “*Zafru’l-Amānī*”, explains that the statement “even an authentic solitary report (*akhbār ahād ṣaḥīḥ*) is not sufficient



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as evidence in ‘aqā’id” is not meant in an absolute sense. It is stated that in matters of ‘aqā’id which a person must believe with absolute certainty (jazzm), solitary reports (akhbār ahād) have no absolute authority. (Al-Laknawi al-Hindi, 1416 AH, p. 203) Saying that such a report is insufficient as proof does not imply the complete rejection of its value; it does not deny that a solitary report can still convey probable (ẓannī) evidence.

It can be stated quite openly that those who claim ‘the Māturīdīs do not accept solitary reports (khabar al-āḥād) as authoritative in matters of creed’ are making accusations without a proper understanding of this theological school. In fact, it is an established reality that, in all creedal works written within the Māturīdī tradition, the issues discussed under the section of sam‘iyyāt (transmitted matters) are substantiated through solitary reports.

Scholars of uṣūl al-fiqh have classified reports into mutawātir and āḥād. The term mutawātir in its lexical sense denotes ‘succession’ or ‘continuity.’ Technically, it refers to a report transmitted not on the basis of pure rational inference but through sensory perception, conveyed by such a large number of transmitters that it is inconceivable, according to customary rational judgment, that they could have agreed upon a falsehood. In other words, it is a report transmitted by such a number of narrators across all levels of the chain, from its beginning to its end. (Al-‘Uthmani al-Tahanawi, 1972, p. 31)

The term āḥād is the plural form of wāḥid (واحد) and denotes ‘individual units’ or ‘single entities.’ In Arabic, the term āḥād is used for numbers ranging from one to nine. On this basis, the term āḥād conveys the meaning of ‘individual units.’ When the word khabar (report) is combined with āḥād, it yields the expression ‘reports of individuals,’ that is, reports transmitted by a limited number of persons—typically ranging from three to nine. In technical usage, however, āḥād refers to any report that does not fulfill the conditions required for mutawātir transmission. (Kīlānī, 2010, p. 96)

The majority of scholars maintain that solitary reports (khabar al-āḥād) yield ẓann (preponderant probability). Ẓann refers to the preference of one of two conflicting possibilities over the other. (Al-Maghribi, n.d., p. 39)

From what has been discussed above, it does not follow that affirming an authentic solitary report (khabar al-āḥād ṣaḥīḥ) is not obligatory. Just as all



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scholars of the legal schools have maintained that acting upon such reports is obligatory, they have likewise affirmed that adherence to them in matters of belief is also required.

“The Ḥanafī scholar Imām al-Sarakhsī (rahīmahu llāh) stated that the reports transmitted concerning the punishment of the grave include some that are mashhūr and others that are solitary (āḥād). These reports, in turn, necessitate affirming the reality of the punishment of the grave.” (‘Itr al-Halabi, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 172)

Matters in creed (‘aqīdah) that are affirmed with certainty are considered definitively established. For this reason, it is incumbent upon every accountable individual (mukallaf) to have faith in these creedal tenets. There are also matters that serve as supplementary details to the core creed or to certain specific creedal issues. These supplementary details are substantiated through ḡannī (preponderant probability) reports.

For example, the details concerning Paradise, the scales of judgment, and similar matters are established through solitary (āḥād) reports. After the number of those who denied this type of report increased, scholars began to give special attention in their works to the concepts of ‘solitary reports’ (khabar al-āḥād) and ‘affirmation based on preponderant probability’ (taṣḡīq bi-ḡann).

When solitary (āḥād) ḡadīth converge on a common point, they collectively form what is termed a ma‘navī mutawātīr (intellectually recurrent report). That is, it is not the wording but the meaning of a ḡadīth that recurs across numerous reports, and this recurring meaning elevates the report to the level of mutawātīr. In the sciences of sīrah and ḡadīth, such reports are very numerous, whereas reports that are mutawātīr in wording are comparatively few.

In matters other than the fundamental articles of faith, an issue is established through an authentic solitary (ṣaḡīḡ āḥād) report and affirmed according to the degree of the report. In such cases, the matters are not affirmed with absolute certainty (as in yaqīn), but their degree of certainty is somewhat lower. For this reason, denying this type of belief does not constitute disbelief. When some scholars say that ‘matters of belief are not established through solitary (āḥād) reports,’ they mean that such reports do not carry the same level of authority as mutawātīr reports. In other words, they indicate that these beliefs are not



obligatory to affirm with the degree of certainty required for mutawātir reports. Accordingly, in matters that are not among the essential pillars of faith, solitary reports (āḥād) serve as authoritative evidence.

‘Ilm’ (knowledge) refers to that which is affirmed with absolute certainty. If certainty is compromised, it becomes ḡann (preponderant probability). Among the majority of scholars, there is no disagreement that authentic solitary (ṣaḥīḥ āḥād) reports do not constitute ‘ilm. This view has been expressed by the scholars such as Ibn Ṣalāḥ and Ḥāfiḡ Ibn Ḥajar—may Allah be pleased with them all. The Mu‘tazilīs, however, maintain that authentic solitary reports do convey ‘ilm, and this position is also attributed, via Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī, to Imām Mālik and Imām Aḥmad. Ibn Taymiyya has explicitly clarified this point. This view is also attributed to Ḥusayn al-Karābīsī¹ and Dāwūd al-Zāhirī².

Conclusion

The descriptions of al-Ṣirāt (the Bridge), the scales (mīzān), the reservoir (ḥawḍ), Paradise, and Hell are established through solitary (āḥād) reports. Some of these reports were originally transmitted via solitary chains but have been elevated to the level of ma‘navī mutawātir through convergence. Matters substantiated through ḡannī (preponderant probability) evidence represent issues on which scholars exercised ijtihād and are considered widely held opinions. In ‘Aqīdah, beliefs are categorized into two types according to the level of certainty: those that are necessarily known in religion are definitive (qaṭ‘ī), established through conclusive evidence (yaqīnī), while those not necessarily known in religion are affirmed through authentic solitary (ṣaḥīḥ āḥād) reports that are free from contradiction. (Al-Ghursi, 2024, p. 96)

In the science of ‘Aqīdah, it is impossible to deny the authority of solitary (āḥād) reports. In fact, the statement is to be understood as a qualified expression. Scholars who say ‘a solitary report is not authoritative’ mean by this that ‘a person who does not affirm a belief established through a solitary report is not considered

¹ Ḥusayn al-Karābīsī was one of the early companions of Imam al-Shāfi‘ī in his madhhab. None of his works have reached us, and his school of thought did not spread.

² Dāwūd ibn ‘Alī al-Zāhirī was the founder of the Zāhirī school. This school adheres to the literal (zāhir) meanings of the Noble Qur‘ān and the Prophetic Sunnah.



a disbeliever.' Since such beliefs are not established with absolute certainty, a person who denies them is not considered to be rejecting the words of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Rather, their denial would pertain to some doubtful aspect of the report's transmission, causing them to question its attribution to the Prophet (peace be upon him). However, if someone were to deny it without any interpretive reasoning while believing that the ḥadīth was indeed spoken by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), they would be considered a disbeliever.

In conclusion, even those who claim that solitary (āḥād) reports are not authoritative in 'Aqīdah acknowledge that matters such as the punishment of the grave, the questioning by Munkar and Nakīr, and the vision of Allah in the Hereafter are established through solitary reports. This serves as clear evidence supporting the correctness of the point we have made above.

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