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# CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN THE USE OF SOLITARY (ĀḤĀD) REPORTS

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**Abstract.** *The article examines the evidentiary standing of the solitary report (khabar al-āḥād) in the science of creed and the contemporary disputes that surround it. It sets out the division of reports into the mass-transmitted (mutawātir) and the solitary, establishes that the first yields necessary knowledge and certainty while the second yields strong probability (ẓann), and then distinguishes three positions held in this question: those who equate the solitary report with the mass-transmitted one and charge its deniers with unbelief; those who regard it as conveying probability and therefore as a supplementary rather than a foundational proof in creed, which is the position of the majority of the scholars of the people of the Sunna and the Community; and those who reject the solitary report altogether on the ground that the Qurʾān censures conjecture. The article shows, with reference to the two Qurʾānic usages of the word ẓann, that the censure of conjecture in the revealed text does not extend to the probability established by sound solitary reports, and it concludes that matters of creed that are fixed by decisive proof must be affirmed with certainty, whereas questions of the unseen treated in the chapter on the revealed reports (samʿiyyāt) admit the solitary report as a secondary proof.*

***Keywords:*** *creed, solitary report, mass-transmitted report, certainty, probability, Māturīdī doctrine, theologians, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, samʿiyyāt.*

## INTRODUCTION

The science of creed teaches a person to study belief by means of proofs and to rise to the level of firm conviction, so that every deed is performed with sincerity and with an intention through which reward is attained. Besides the questions of belief themselves, this science also studies the manner in which the rulings of creed are derived, and in this derivation reports are used extensively. The subject of the report is itself a broad one, and it is of fundamental importance as a proof in the sciences of creed, of jurisprudence and of ethics.

In the science of ḥadīth the word «report» (khabar) is used as a synonym of «ḥadīth», whereas in the science of creed it is used both in the sense of ḥadīth and in its lexical sense of «that which is conveyed by way of speech or of writing» (Majmaʿ al-Lugha

al-ʿArabiyya, 2008:215). In the creedal teaching of the Māturīdī school the report is employed as «an instrument that produces cognition», and the books of this school open with a discussion entitled «The instruments by which the realities of things are known and by which knowledge is produced in human beings» (al-Ḥanafī, n.d.:28). In that discussion it is stated that reports are of two kinds, the mass-transmitted and the solitary.

The aim of the present article is to clarify the evidentiary value of each of these two kinds, to set out the three positions taken by scholars concerning the admissibility of the solitary report as a proof in creed, and to establish the criterion by which a report of probable standing may and may not be used in the foundations of belief.

**MAIN PART**

The mass-transmitted report produces necessary knowledge, that is to say knowledge that arises of itself and without reflection (al-Ḥanafī, n.d.:31). Knowledge of this kind arises in the hearer spontaneously, and whoever hears such a report and denies it by saying that no such thing exists is removed from the ranks of rational persons. Knowledge, in turn, expresses certainty (yaqīn).

Mullā ʿAlī al-Qārī defined the mass-transmitted report in his commentary upon «Sharḥ Nukhbat al-fikar» in the following terms:

المتواتر المفيد للعلم اليقيني واليقين هو الاعتقاد الجازم المطابق، وهذا هو المعتمد أنّ الخبر المتواتر يفيد العلم الضروري وهو الذي يضطرّ الإنسان إليه بحيث لا يمكن دفعه

«The mass-transmitted report is that which conveys certain knowledge; and certainty is a decisive belief corresponding to reality. The relied-upon position is that the mass-transmitted report conveys necessary knowledge, which is that to which a person is compelled in such a way that it cannot be repelled» (al-Qārī, n.d.:179).

The mass-transmitted report is therefore knowledge that cannot be denied and that is affirmed with decisive conviction. The Qurʾān and the ḥadīths transmitted by the mass-transmitted route belong to this category, and a ruling or a question of creed is established by such a report. Opposite it stands the solitary report, which conveys ẓann, that is strong probability; and the majority of scholars have held that the solitary report makes action obligatory but does not convey knowledge in the strict sense (al-Qārī, n.d.:220).

In the same commentary of Mullā ʿAlī al-Qārī the following is said concerning the solitary report:

فإنهم قالوا: أحاديث الصحيحين التي ليست بمتواترة إنما تفيد الظنّ، فإنها آحاد، والآحاد إنما يفيد الظنّ على ما تقرّر

«The verifying scholars and the majority of the learned have said: those ḥadīths of the two Ṣaḥīḥ collections that are not mass-transmitted convey only probability, for they are solitary reports, and the solitary report, according to the established position, conveys only probability» (al-Qārī, n.d.:220).

Solitary ḥadīths accordingly convey the probability that stands opposite knowledge. The term ẓann is applied to the preponderant of two sides in conviction, that is to say to an apprehension of between seventy and ninety-nine per cent, and it stands above doubt and vain imagination. In the practical sciences of the law the place of the solitary report is a wide one: Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Muslim each devoted a separate chapter of their Ṣaḥīḥ collections to the permissibility of accepting the solitary report and to acting upon it. Since, however, the rulings and principles of creed demand affirmation at the level of decisive conviction, the proof adduced in them must be a report that conveys certainty.

The word ʿaqīda is applied to that to which the heart is firmly and soundly bound, and when the heart is firmly bound to a thing no doubt whatsoever should remain concerning it. When the earlier theologians said that the solitary report is not a proof in the science of creed, they had in view precisely this creed that constitutes the very root of religion and to which the heart must be firmly bound. As disputes concerning the admissibility of solitary reports in creed increased, a need arose to clarify that formulation and to expound it in detail. Those who hold views upon the admissibility of the solitary report as a proof in the science of creed fall into three groups.

The first group regards the solitary report as established decisively in the Qurʾān and the Sunna in the same manner as the mass-transmitted report. In their view the solitary report conveys knowledge, that is to say decisive conviction. They adduce as their principal proof the noble verses in which opposition to the Messenger of God is forbidden, and accordingly they charge whoever denies that a given question is established by a solitary report with unbelief and with departure from religion (Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2015:57). They regard the statement of the scholars that creed is established only by a decisive proof, by a verse or by a ḥadīth that has attained the rank of mass transmission, as an innovation for which there is no root in the revealed law, and

they claim that none of the pious predecessors ever said that the solitary report does not establish creed. They adduce as proof those verses which state that the Messenger does not speak from his own desire and that all that he said is from religion and is a revelation of God (al-Shinqīṭī, 2002:160).

We too submit to the truth that the words of the Messenger belong to religion, that they constitute the revealed law and that he did not speak anything other than revelation. A person who is unaware of the degrees that proofs occupy in respect of their establishment and of their indication accepts such statements at once upon hearing them; a learned person, however, knows that a proof fit to serve as a basis for deriving a rule or a ruling must be decisive both in its indication and in its establishment. Conversely, if a wording in the Qurʾān or in the Sunna indicates more than one meaning, or if it is not decisive in its establishment but probable, then one who abandons that rule or ruling is not charged with departure from religion or with unbelief. Wordings in the Qurʾān and the Sunna that indicate more than one meaning and that are not decisively established constitute the probable rulings concerning which scholars exercise independent reasoning.

Emphasizing this very meaning, the contemporary scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ḥasan Ḥabannaka al-Maydānī, may God have mercy upon him, called for caution both against stating categorically that solitary reports conveying probability cannot be a proof in creed and against asserting that they can be a decisive proof. He stressed: «For this reason it is difficult to turn that which indicates probability into a firm article of creed. It is not correct for us to make decisive belief obligatory on the basis of a report that conveys probability, nor is it correct for us to charge with unbelief a person who does not believe in that which is established by probability» (Ibn Ḥazm, 2007:I/97).

If the proofs adduced by this first group are examined, it becomes evident that they have understood the verses and the ḥadīths in accordance with their own views. For the verses concerning the necessity of guarding against opposition to the Messenger of God, and concerning the severe punishment awaiting whoever opposes the Messenger of God, do not entail, as that group understood, that a report attended by doubt may serve as a proof for the establishment of creed, which is the root and the pillar of religion. On the contrary, the Messenger himself taught the community to put every matter in its proper place, and the scholars who exercise independent reasoning have been foremost in understanding this path. They did not adduce the solitary report as a proof for a creed

the denier of which is regarded as having left religion and as an unbeliever. A decisive ruling is derived from that in which the wording of the verse or of the ḥadīth indicates decisively and is decisively established.

The second group consists of those who state that the solitary report conveys probability, and they are the majority of the scholars of the people of the Sunna and the Community as well as the verifying scholars (al-Qārī, n.d.:220). They state that, because the solitary report conveys probability, it is not a proof for the root of creed, but is accepted as a supplementary and corroborating proof for a root of creed already established by a decisive proof; and they hold that some articles of belief are affirmed at the level of probability. The Ḥanafī scholar Kamāl Ibn al-Humām, may God have mercy upon him, stated that in the science of creed affirmation is decisive or probable according to the kind of proof (al-ʿUmarī, 2020:21). Imām al-Ghazālī, who bears the title Proof of Islam, likewise stated in the chapter on the revealed reports of «al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād» that affirmation follows the kind of proof (al-Ghazālī, n.d.:95).

The scholars of the people of the Sunna state that the reason why the solitary report cannot establish a decisive article of creed is that its rank is lower than that of the mass-transmitted report. That which demands decisive affirmation must be proved by a proof that conveys decisive affirmation, and that which is affirmed at the level of probability must be proved by a proof established at the level of probability. At this point a question arises: is the solitary report then to be rejected?

It is not rejected. For when a person rejects a solitary report he thereby rejects a trustworthy transmitter and his precision in transmission, and indeed rejects or accuses of untruthfulness the Messenger himself and the Companion. What is meant here is the sound solitary report. The mass-transmitted report is a report accepted unanimously, and in its case there is no need to examine the probity of the transmitters or their precision in transmission; in the solitary report, by contrast, the states of the transmitters and the text are examined by the search for evidence, and the report is accordingly divided into the accepted and the rejected, into the sound and the unsound. It follows from this that acting upon the solitary report is obligatory, and the Companions, may God be pleased with them, and those who came after them followed this path.

The third group consists of those who do not accept the solitary report as a proof at all, on the ground that it conveys probability and not certainty. They base themselves upon the censure of conjecture in the Noble Qurʾān. Those who reject solitary reports

altogether say that the punishment of the grave is established by a solitary ḥadīth, that the solitary report conveys conjecture, and that God has commanded avoidance of conjecture in the Noble Qurʾān (Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2011:527), and in this way they give their own imaginings the appearance of a foundation.

It is appropriate at this point to enter in detail into the probability conveyed by the solitary report. In the Noble Qurʾān the word ẓann occurs in two different senses. The first is that of firm conviction:

ٱلَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُم مُّلَٰقُوا۟ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَٰجِعُونَ

«They are those who are certain that they will meet their Lord and that unto Him they will return» (Qurʾān 2:46; Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2011:7).

Ibn Kathīr, may God have mercy upon him, said of the word yaẓunnu in his commentary: «The Arabs sometimes call certainty ẓann, and they also call conjecture and doubt ẓann. This resembles their calling both darkness and light by the single word sudfa, and their calling both the helper and the one who seeks help ṣārikh» (Ibn Kathīr, n.d.).

In another noble verse, by contrast, the word occurs in the opposite sense:

وَمَا يَتَّبِعُ أَكْثَرُهُمْ إِلَّا ظَنًّا ۚ إِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ شَيْـًٔا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا يَفْعَلُونَ

«Most of them follow nothing but conjecture; truly, conjecture avails nothing against the truth» (Qurʾān 10:36; Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2011:213).

In this verse the word ẓann has come as the opposite of certainty. It follows that those who hold that ẓann expresses conjecture and that conjecture has been censured are unaware that the word also bears the sense of conviction. It must be understood that the ẓann which in the science of creed stands one degree below the level of certainty in apprehension, and a conjecture that has arisen without any foundation whatsoever, are two entirely different things.

Refuting those who reject the solitary report, Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, may God have mercy upon him, said: «There is a difference between one ẓann and another. There is assuredly a difference between the ẓann of the ignorant who say that the solitary report is not a proof in creed and the ẓann transmitted in the sound ḥadīths related by such imāms as Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Muslim, may God have mercy upon them, who are acknowledged by the greater part of the Islamic community» (Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2015:58).

## CONCLUSION

It may be said by way of conclusion that it is obligatory to accept the knowledge established by a decisive and certain proof and to believe in it, and that whoever denies a creed of this kind becomes an unbeliever. The decisive character of such a creed is widely known among the Muslims; that is to say, it is a creed that a Muslim is ordinarily able to know and ignorance of which is not accepted as an excuse, such as the obligatory character of the prayer and of the fast, the oneness of the Creator of the world, and the knowledge that the Creator is described by perfect attributes and is free of all deficiency.

If a creed or a question of creed is established by a decisive and reliable proof, it must be affirmed with decisive conviction; and in the same way the proof of a creed that is not decisive is probable in the measure of its own rank. In the questions treated in the chapter on the revealed reports of the science of creed, solitary reports have been adduced as a secondary proof for the establishment of such questions and as a proof in matters that are probable (al-Ghazālī, n.d.:95; al-ʿUmarī, 2020:21). The solitary report is therefore neither to be raised to the rank of the mass-transmitted report nor to be rejected: it obliges action, it corroborates that which decisive proof has already established, and it is a proof in that which is itself affirmed at the level of probability.

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