



THE ROLE OF ĀḤĀD REPORTS IN MATTERS OF ISLAMIC BELIEF

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Abstract. *This article examines the evidentiary status of āḥād reports, understood as reports that do not meet the conditions of mass transmission, in Islamic theology. Through a conceptual reading of theological, hadith, and legal theoretical sources, it distinguishes certainty and probability in both transmission and meaning. The analysis argues that the authority of a report depends on the level of assent required by the proposition it supports. Within the theological framework adopted here, mutawātir reports yield certain knowledge, whereas āḥād reports ordinarily warrant probabilistic assent. Nevertheless, āḥād reports may elucidate doctrinal details, corroborate other evidence, and support propositions for which certainty is not required. Reports concerning prophetic miracles illustrate the argument that individually transmitted accounts may collectively establish a shared meaning through tawātur in meaning. The discussion also considers corroborating indications, the distinction between hadith authenticity and epistemic certainty, and the implications of these distinctions for accusations of unbelief. The article concludes that scholarly disagreements should be examined in their evidentiary and doctrinal contexts rather than reduced to an unrestricted acceptance or rejection of āḥād reports.*

Keywords: *āḥād reports, mutawātir, Islamic theology, Māturīdism, hadith, epistemic certainty, probabilistic evidence*

INTRODUCTION

Belief is an integral part of human life: people formulate goals in accordance with their convictions and strive to live by them. In the theological perspective adopted in this article, action grounded in sound belief is valid and valuable. Sufi Allayar expresses this principle in a couplet:

One who knows no creed belongs among Satan's followers; A thousand years of deeds without it are but wind.

The point of the couplet is that, where belief is erroneous, the accumulation of deeds cannot by itself make those deeds beneficial. The article invokes Qur'an 14:18 in support of this proposition. In the Uzbek translation cited, the deeds of those who disbelieve in their Lord are compared to ashes scattered by the wind on a stormy day; they retain nothing of what they have earned, and this is described as profound error (Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2011, p. 257).



Within this account, reason alone is insufficient to discover everything pertaining to sound belief. Prophets were therefore sent in successive ages to warn and instruct humanity. The discipline that distinguishes sound from erroneous belief and explains the relevant particulars is known as ‘aqīda or kalām. It addresses the existence of the Creator, divine attributes and names, prophethood, existence, and sam‘iyyāt: matters known through transmitted revelation, including the unseen. Its purpose is to lead rational persons from doubt or uncritical adherence to assured conviction concerning these subjects.

The author maintains that scholars of Ahl al-Sunna preserved a balance between rational and transmitted evidence in doctrinal judgments. In the author’s assessment, other groups erred by giving excessive authority either to rational proof or to transmitted proof, because their arguments did not rest on a sound scholarly method. This characterization expresses the confessional standpoint from which the present discussion proceeds.

Hadith constitute a principal source of Islam and explain the Qur’an. Yet disagreement persists over the use of āḥād reports in matters of belief. The central question is not simply whether such reports may serve as evidence, but what kind of evidentiary authority they possess and which degree of assent they can justify. This article examines that question by distinguishing certainty from probability in transmission, meaning, and doctrinal judgment.

METHODS

The inquiry takes the form of a conceptual and textual discussion of the theological, hadith, lexicographical, and legal theoretical works cited below. It compares definitions of knowledge, proof, and transmitted reports, then uses the distinction between transmission and meaning to organize the discussion of doctrinal evidence. Its examples concern divine names and attributes, prophetic miracles, and matters of the unseen.

The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical. Definitions attributed to Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, Najm al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Nasafī, and Kamāl ibn al-Humām are considered through the works in which the article cites them. The passage from al-Ghazālī is read in relation to the distinction between certain and probabilistic assent. Reports of miracles serve as illustrations of the author’s argument about cumulative transmission; the discussion does not undertake an independent examination of their individual chains of transmission.



RESULTS

Knowledge and evidentiary authority

A definition attributed to Imam Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī describes knowledge as “an attribute through which that which is mentioned becomes manifest to the one in whom the attribute subsists” (as cited in Abdur Rahim, 2014, p. 10; translated here). On this understanding, knowledge requires an attribute that makes an object of consideration clear and manifest. A cognition that does not reach this level is instead conjecture or an understanding characterized by a high degree of probability.

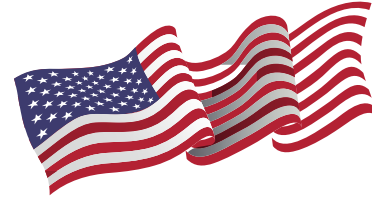
The term ḥujja means evidence or proof. The expression al-iḥtijāj denotes adducing something as evidence (Ibn Maṣṣūr, 2016, p. 779). In this broad sense, the term encompasses different forms and strengths of evidentiary support. Consequently, saying that a report is used as a ḥujja does not, by itself, identify the degree of certainty that it establishes.

Certainty and probability in transmission and meaning

In Islamic legal and theological reasoning, evidence is classified as qaṭʿī, or certain, and ḥẓannī, or probabilistic. Here, ḥẓann denotes a preponderant judgment rather than an arbitrary guess. The article distinguishes four categories, addressing transmission and meaning as separate dimensions.

First, evidence certain in its transmission (qaṭʿī al-thubūt) reaches qualified jurists without a defect or addition that compromises the certainty of its transmission. Such transmission is described as mutawātir. A mutawātir report rests on sensory perception rather than solely on rational inference and is conveyed by a number of transmitters whose collusion in falsehood is ordinarily inconceivable. This multiplicity must persist throughout the successive levels of transmission (al-Tahānawī, 1972, p. 31). The transmission of the Qurʿan and of some elements of the Sunna provides examples.

Second, evidence certain in its meaning (qaṭʿī al-dalāla) admits no alternative to the intended meaning. The article includes in this category Qurʿanic verses classified as mufassar and muḥkam, as well as mutawātir and āḥād hadith whose meanings are unambiguous. Certainty of meaning is therefore distinguished from certainty of transmission: an āḥād report may be unambiguous in meaning without being certain in transmission.



Third, evidence probabilistic in its transmission (*ẓannī al-thubūt*) reaches qualified jurists through a route that does not establish certainty. The possibility of a transmitter's falsehood or deficient retention is among the factors discussed in this connection. *Āḥād* hadith belong to this category. Lexically, an *āḥād* report is a report transmitted by a single person; technically, however, the term denotes any report that does not satisfy the conditions of *mutawātir* transmission (Kīlānī Muḥammad Khalīfa, 2010, p. 96). The technical category is thus broader than reports conveyed by only one transmitter.

Fourth, evidence probabilistic in its meaning (*ẓannī al-dalāla*) indicates its intended meaning with preponderant probability while leaving room for another interpretation. Examples include verses subject to interpretive construal (*ta'wīl*) and hadith understood in a probabilistic sense (Abū al-Ḥājj, 2020, p. 66).

These distinctions allow for evidence that is certain in both transmission and meaning, evidence that is probabilistic in both, and evidence whose certainty differs between the two dimensions. Some evidence cannot independently establish the proposition at issue but can still be accepted as secondary or corroborating support. The expression “adducing as evidence” applies across these different levels.

Accordingly, evidence usable in Qur'anic exegesis or prophetic biography may be insufficient to establish a legal ruling. In one context, a report may independently substantiate a claim; in another, it may merely reinforce an argument already supported by other evidence. Both uses may nevertheless be described as *iḥtijāj*.

Reports as a source of theological knowledge

The word *khavar*, qualified here as either *mutawātir* or *āḥād*, lexically denotes something communicated orally or in writing (Mu'jam al-wasīṭ, 2008, p. 215). Its technical use varies by discipline. In logic and grammar, a *khavar* is a statement capable of being true or false. In hadith studies, it is used alongside the term *hadith* for sayings of the Prophet, peace be upon him, statements of the Companions, and legal opinions of the Successors. In theology, “truthful report” (*al-khavar al-ṣādiq*) designates one of the sources through which knowledge is acquired.

Because *mutawātir* reports convey certainty, they occupy a central evidentiary role in theology. Najm al-Dīn 'Umar al-Nasafī states that a *mutawātir* report produces necessary knowledge (as cited in al-Ḥanafī, 2010, p. 31). On this account, the resulting cognition



is so certain that disbelief in it is not possible; no additional proof is needed to establish what the report conveys.

Propositions established by certain evidence require certain assent. The article also recognizes probabilistic doctrinal propositions established through probabilistic evidence. In the position presented here, denying such propositions does not warrant an accusation of unbelief or religious innovation. By contrast, the author treats denial of matters necessarily known to belong to the religion as grounds for an accusation of unbelief, because these matters are known through mass transmission. The original explanatory note specifies the pillars and publicly recognized distinguishing observances of Islam.

Among later scholars, Kamāl ibn al-Humām explicitly includes both certainty and probability in his definition of kalām. As transmitted in al-Maqdisī's commentary, the definition concerns a person's knowledge, on the basis of evidence, of the beliefs belonging to Islam that are incumbent upon that person, with certainty in some cases and probability in others (as cited in al-Maqdisī, 2024, p. 54). Probability here means knowledge understood as a preponderant judgment.

The doctrinal uses of āḥād reports

Āḥād reports are classified as probabilistic because their transmission does not reach the level of certainty associated with tawātur. Their lower epistemic status reflects a residual possibility that the wording and meaning transmitted do not correspond exactly to what the Messenger of God said. The article therefore argues that rulings supported by such evidence require assent proportionate to its probabilistic status.

The author identifies the use of āḥād reports in discussions of divine names and attributes, in treatments of miracles and their types within the doctrine of prophethood, and in the chapters on sam'īyyāt. In some cases these reports explain particulars; in others they supply secondary support. Their authority is thus differentiated according to the proposition and evidentiary function at issue.

Miracle reports and cumulative transmission

Many miracles attributed to the Messenger of God are reported through āḥād transmission. The article characterizes these reports as certain in meaning but probabilistic in transmission. It argues that a miracle was certain in both respects for contemporaries



who directly witnessed it. It makes the same claim for contemporaries to whom an account reached the level of mutawātir transmission. For later generations, however, the author explains that certainty of transmission could be diminished by questions concerning transmitters, criticism of their reliability, poor memory, or a limited number of narrators.

The article nevertheless argues that a collection of āḥād reports transmitted through different routes can establish tawātur in a shared meaning. It illustrates this argument with accounts of stones greeting the Prophet, water flowing between his fingers, pebbles glorifying God in his hands, a camel speaking to him, and meat from a sheep warning him that it had been poisoned by Jewish people. These are presented as transmitted miracle narratives, rather than as events independently verified in the present inquiry.

According to the author, although the individual accounts are āḥād, their aggregate establishes at the level of tawātur the general proposition that the Prophet performed sensory miracles. This is tawātur ma‘nawī, or mass transmission of a shared meaning. Within the argument developed here, that shared meaning can then support the prophethood of Muhammad, peace be upon him: if prophethood is confirmed by miracles, the performance of such miracles provides evidence for the prophetic status of the person who performs them.

The author stresses that this cumulative argument requires careful investigation and reflection. Transmission routes, different forms of narration, and routes preserved in commentaries must be examined. The article proposes that, for someone not persuaded of Muhammad’s prophethood by Qur’anic evidence, miracle reports collectively attaining tawātur in meaning may provide an additional argument for his prophethood.

Assent to reports concerning the unseen

The article turns to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, known by the honorific Ḥujjat al-Islām, or Proof of Islam, and describes his treatment in al-Iqtisād fī al-i‘tiqād as beginning with sam‘iyyāt, matters of the unseen known through transmitted revelation. The passage cited sets out a distinction between levels of assent:

Whatever is conveyed by transmitted revelation must be examined. If reason allows it, assent to it is obligatory with certainty when the transmitted proofs are decisive in their text and basis of transmission, admitting no alternative possibility; if they are probabilistic, assent is obligatory at the level of probability. (al-Ghazālī, 2021, p. 115; translated here)



The author reads this passage as supporting the distinction expressed in Ibn al-Humām's definition of theology. In the source's explanatory notes, certainty is associated with firm assurance, while probability is associated with a strong likelihood. The obligation to assent is therefore understood in relation to the strength of the evidence.

DISCUSSION

Authenticity and certainty are distinct judgments

Within the framework developed above, āḥād reports are not sufficient where theology requires decisive and certain knowledge. This limitation does not mean that a report cannot be attributed to the Messenger of God. It means that its attribution has not been established by a route yielding certainty. If examination gives sufficient confidence that a report is authentically attributable to him, it may function as evidence at the appropriate level.

The author accordingly interprets scholarly statements that "āḥād reports do not constitute proof" in light of the hierarchy between certain and probabilistic evidence. A proposition requiring certainty cannot be established by evidence whose epistemic force remains probabilistic. The author treats this as a requirement of a coherent theory of knowledge. By contrast, āḥād reports have been used for probabilistic matters connected with doctrine, including descriptions of the bridge over Hell (ṣirāt), the balance (mīzān), Paradise and Hell, and a tree in Paradise.

The probabilistic character of āḥād transmission does not itself justify denying a report or declaring it false. Hadith scholars have classified āḥād reports as authentic, and numerous such reports appear in the Ṣaḥīḥ collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. A small number of transmitters does not, on its own, make a report false if those transmitters are trustworthy.

In explaining what it means for an āḥād hadith to be ṣaḥīḥ, the author emphasizes transmission by reliable narrators. On that account, rejecting or declaring such a report false involves challenging the testimony of trustworthy transmitters, which itself requires evidence. This explanation concerns the author's argument for accepting reliable transmission; it does not collapse the distinction between hadith authenticity and the certainty required for every doctrinal proposition.



Transmission and the scope of disagreement

The Companions regarded what they heard, saw, and learned from the Messenger as a trust and sought diligently to convey it to subsequent generations. In reconciling apparently conflicting hadith, commentators sometimes explain that a Companion may not have heard a statement in full because of distance, late arrival, or other circumstances. In other cases, only one Companion may have witnessed an event. Despite such factors limiting certainty, the Companions remained committed to transmission, as did the Successors and those who followed them.

Thus, an āḥād hadith is attributed to the Messenger as a hadith and is acted upon on the basis of that attribution. The author observes that its use in practical legal rulings is broadly accommodated, while its evidentiary role in doctrine has occasioned considerable disagreement. Those disagreements require closer examination. Did a scholar reject āḥād reports as evidence altogether, reject them only for foundational doctrines, or deny their sufficiency specifically where certainty was required? These are different positions and should not be conflated.

Corroborating indications and doctrinal restraint

The author suggests that scholars who state that “āḥād reports yield knowledge” may intend a particularly high degree of probability. Alternatively, they may be referring to reports strengthened by additional indications and evidence rather than to āḥād reports without qualification. In the author’s account, corroborating indications (qarā’īn) can raise a report to the level of certain conviction and hence to knowledge. The suggestion that this is what those scholars intended remains an interpretation of their statements, not a demonstrated conclusion about every scholar who used that formulation.

For this reason, the author cautions against superficial assessments made without investigating the causes of scholarly disagreement. The decisive questions concern the character of the report, the corroboration available, and the epistemic demands of the proposition being established. The article’s examples illustrate these conceptual distinctions; they do not provide a comprehensive assessment of individual miracle reports or an exhaustive comparison of theological schools.

A further implication concerns accusations of unbelief (takfīr). In the position defended here, it is inappropriate to accuse a person of unbelief for denying a probabilistic



doctrinal matter supported by āḥād reports. Distinguishing such matters from doctrines established with certainty is therefore essential. The author regards this distinction as a means of resolving many misunderstandings surrounding the theological authority of transmitted reports.

CONCLUSION

The article argues for a differentiated account of the authority of āḥād reports in Islamic belief. Certainty of transmission and certainty of meaning must be assessed separately, and the strength of the evidence must correspond to the degree of assent required. Āḥād reports ordinarily provide probabilistic support, but may explain doctrinal particulars, corroborate other proofs, and, in the author's account, contribute to certainty through cumulative transmission or additional indications. Their inability, by themselves, to establish a proposition requiring certainty does not imply that they are false or devoid of authority. Careful attention to these distinctions is necessary both for interpreting scholarly disagreement and for avoiding unwarranted accusations of unbelief.

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