

The Book of Fairness

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī

Translated by Tareq Taqiaddin

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ISBN 979-8-9976155-0-5

Paperback · 6 × 9 inches · 176 pages

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al-Inṣāf fīmā yajibu i'tiqāduhu wa-lā yajūzu al-jahlu bihi

The Book of Fairness concerning What Must Be Believed
and What It Is Impermissible Not to Know

(Translated)

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī

Translated by

Tareq Taqiaddin

TAHQIQ CIRCLE PRESS

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First paperback edition, 2026.

ISBN 979-8-9976155-0-5

Published by Tahqiq Circle Press.

Translated from Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf fīmā yajibu i'tiqāduhu wa-lā yajūzu al-jahlu bihi*, Cairo: Maktab Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1369/1950.

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INTRODUCTION

AL-BĀQILLĀNĪ AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF ASH‘ARISM

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, who died in Baghdad in 403/1013, belongs to the generation that transformed the teaching associated with Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī into a durable scholastic tradition. The basic facts of his early life are not securely known. The biographical literature places his origins in Basra, while his mature scholarly life unfolded chiefly in Baghdad. There he became known as a Mālikī jurist, a judge, a theologian, a teacher, and a formidable participant in disputation. Later reports also connect him with the Buyid court and with a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine court. These reports help explain the breadth of his later reputation, but they should not be made to carry more historical weight than the surviving evidence permits (Ibish 1966, 5 to 6; Thiele 2016a, 230).

Al-Bāqillānī did not study directly with al-Ash‘arī. The line of instruction described in the sources passes through Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bāhilī, a student of al-Ash‘arī. Two of al-Bāqillānī’s most important contemporaries, Ibn Fūrak and Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāʿīnī, are likewise associated with al-Bāhilī. Modern scholarship therefore treats these three theologians as central figures in the consolidation and wider dissemination of Ash‘arite thought during the later fourth/tenth century. Their work did not produce a single undifferentiated system. Each developed inherited positions in a distinct setting, and the variety among them is part of the early history of the school rather than an exception to it (Thiele 2016a, 229 to 230).

The word “Ash‘arism” can consequently mislead if it is understood as the name of an already completed doctrinal structure that al-Bāqillānī merely repeated. The school was being transmitted, organized, debated, and revised. Al-Bāqillānī defended positions that he identified with the People of the Sunna and the Community, preserved central teachings associated with al-Ash‘arī, and supplied them with increasingly systematic argument. He also addressed questions that earlier formulations had not settled and, in some works, adopted concepts that were associated with rival theological traditions. His importance lies not only in transmitting a body of conclusions, but also in helping to shape the methods and conceptual resources through which those conclusions could be defended.

This historical qualification matters when reading *al-Inṣāf*. Al-Bāqillānī's theological works are not interchangeable summaries of a timeless personal system. The *Tamhīd*, a substantial work of theological polemic, is generally treated as an early composition. His much larger *Hidāyat al-mustarshidīn* appears to have been a late and exceptionally extensive work, originally comprising at least sixteen volumes. Only part of it has been recovered. Evidence from the surviving material shows that al-Bāqillānī sometimes revised or developed positions that he had defended in earlier writings. It would therefore be unsafe to present every formulation in *al-Inṣāf* as his last word on its subject, particularly when the work itself cannot be securely placed within a complete chronology of his writings (Schmidtke 2011; Thiele 2016a, 230 to 232).

The proper claim is both more modest and more useful. *Al-Inṣāf* gives direct access to a compact presentation of theology attributed to one of the principal architects of early Ash'arism. It shows how a learned theologian organized the obligations of belief, joined rational demonstration to revealed evidence, distinguished divine attributes from created properties, and conducted arguments against positions he regarded as mistaken. Its brevity makes its structure unusually visible. Its density makes careful reading necessary.

A THEOLOGIAN, JURIST, JUDGE, AND DISPUTANT

The surviving picture of al-Bāqillānī cannot be reduced to that of a writer composing in scholarly isolation. His honorific title, al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr, preserves the memory of judicial office. Biographical sources associate his legal formation with the Mālikī school and his theological formation with the developing Ash'arite tradition. The combination is significant. It places him within several overlapping forms of learned authority: the interpretation of revealed law, the formulation of doctrine, the adjudication of disputes, and the public defense of religious claims.

Baghdad provided an especially demanding setting for this work. It was the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, while political power during much of al-Bāqillānī's mature life rested with Buyid rulers. The city brought together jurists, theologians, traditionists, philosophers, secretaries, and representatives of competing religious communities and schools. Theological disagreement was not confined to private reflection. It could appear in teaching circles, courtly encounters, refutations, legal controversies, and debates over the proper boundaries of communal belief.

THE TEXT

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

The eminent judge and imam, the Sword of the Sunna and Tongue of the Community, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib ibn Muḥammad, may God be pleased with him, said:

Praise be to God, possessor of power and majesty, greatness and perfection. I praise him for the fullness of his blessings and the abundance of his reward. I ask him to bless his chosen prophet Muḥammad, his righteous family, his worthy Companions, and those who follow them in goodness <until the Day of Final Abiding>.

To proceed: I have considered the request of the noble, virtuous, and devout lady, may God grant her success in seeking and defending the truth, turning away from and avoiding falsehood, seeking nearness to God by believing what the ordinances of religion make obligatory, and following the righteous forebears among the believers. She requested that I state concisely what morally responsible persons are required to believe and are not permitted to remain ignorant of, and what, if embraced as one's religion, brings a person to adherence to the obligatory truth and safety from innovations and rejected falsehood.

With God's power, aid, will, and bounty, I shall give her a concise account sufficient for that purpose. Understanding it will remove the need for further inquiry or for directing one's attention elsewhere. We therefore say, with God granting success:

What is required of a morally responsible person is as follows:

1. One must begin by understanding the first principles and preliminaries without which one cannot complete rational inquiry into knowledge of God, mighty and majestic: the reality of his oneness, the attributes by which he is distinguished from his creation, and why his possession of those attributes makes him alone, rather than any of his servants, deserving of worship through obedience.

The first subject, then, is knowledge, its properties, and its classifications. Knowledge is defined as cognition of an object of knowledge

as it is. Thus, every instance of knowledge is cognition, and every instance of cognition is knowledge.

2. One must know that knowledge is divided into two kinds. The first is God's knowledge, glorified is he. It is an attribute belonging to his essence and is neither necessary nor inferential knowledge. God, most high, says, "He sent it down with his knowledge"; "No female conceives or gives birth except with his knowledge"; and "Know that it was sent down with God's knowledge." God thereby affirms knowledge of himself and expressly states in his Book that it is his attribute.

The other kind is created beings' knowledge. This, in turn, is divided into two kinds: necessary knowledge and knowledge attained through rational inquiry and inference.

Necessary knowledge is that which imposes itself upon created beings in such a way that they cannot repel it or doubt its object. Examples include knowledge of what the five senses apprehend and the necessary cognitions that arise immediately within the soul.

Inferential knowledge is that whose attainment requires thought and deliberation and whose means are rational inquiry and proof. It is possible for a person to withdraw from it and to doubt its object.

All necessary knowledge arises in created beings through six avenues. Five are the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Whatever is apprehended through any of these senses, including body, color, spatial state, speech, sound, odor, taste, heat, cold, softness, roughness, hardness, and pliancy, is known necessarily.

The sixth avenue is knowledge arising immediately within the soul without being apprehended through any of the senses. Examples include a person's knowledge of his own existence and of the pleasure, pain, grief, joy, power, incapacity, health, and illness that occur within him and are contained in the soul. Other examples include knowledge that two opposites cannot coexist, that bodies cannot be devoid of combination or separation, and everything known through the first principles of reason; knowledge that fruit comes only from a tree or a date palm; knowledge that milk comes only from an udder; and everything required by customary patterns.

Everything apart from these kinds is inferential knowledge. It is attained only by renewed recollection and inquiry, and by reflection employing reason.

These necessary cognitions include knowledge arising through the first principles of reason and knowledge required by customary patterns. Beasts, children, and persons of diminished capacity do not share such knowledge with rational persons. Examples include immediate knowledge and knowledge encompassing many customary patterns, such as that two is greater than one and that two opposites cannot coexist. These and similar matters are required by customary patterns and the self-evident principles of reason, and knowledge of them is not confined to some rational persons rather than others.

3. One must know that inference is an inquiry of the mind by which knowledge is sought of what lies beyond necessary cognition and sense perception.

Evidence is that through the sound examination of which one may attain cognition of something not known necessarily. It is of three kinds:

First, rational evidence, which has a relation to that which it indicates. An act, for example, indicates an agent and the attributes the agent must possess, such as life, knowledge, power, and will.

Second, revealed legal evidence. It signifies through articulated language after convention has been established, and through meanings derived from that language.

Third, linguistic evidence. By established convention, it signifies the meanings of discourse and the significations of names, attributes, and all other expressions. This category also includes the significations of writing, symbols, gestures, and finger configurations that indicate numerical quantities, as well as everything that signifies only by convention and agreement.

The one who establishes the evidence is the indicator. That for which the evidence is established is the indicated. The reasoner is the person who examines the evidence. His inference consists in examining the evidence and seeking through it knowledge of what is absent from him.

4. One must know that objects of knowledge are of two kinds: the nonexistent and the existent. There is no third kind and no intermediate state between them.

The nonexistent is that which is absent and is not a thing. God, mighty and majestic, says, "I created you before, when you were nothing"; and "Was there not a period of time when the human being was nothing worthy

of mention?” He thereby states that the nonexistent is absent and is not a thing.

The existent is a thing that is actual and established. To say “a thing” is an affirmation, while to say “not a thing” is a negation. God, most high, says, “Say: What thing is greatest in testimony? Say: God.” God, glorified is he, is existent, not nonexistent.

Arabic speakers say, “I knew a thing,” “I saw a thing,” and “I heard a thing,” thereby referring to something actual and existent. Their expression “not a thing” negates what is nonexistent. If the nonexistent were a thing, the statement “not a thing” could never be a true negation and would always be false. That is invalid by agreement.

5. One must know that all existents are divided into two kinds. The first is beginningless and has never ceased to exist: God, most high, and his essential attributes, by which he has always been and will always remain described. The forms “more prior” and “beginningless” intensify the description of priority, just as “more knowing” and “all-knowing” intensify knowledge, and “more hearing” and “all-hearing” intensify hearing.

The second kind is originated, meaning that its existence has a beginning. “Originated” denotes that which did not exist and then came to be. This meaning is taken from such expressions as “Something newly befell so-and-so, such as an illness or headache,” “He introduced an innovation into religion,” “He constructed a projecting window,” and “He erected a building in the open court.” In each case, someone brought about something that had not previously existed.

6. One must know that all originated things fall into three classes: body, substance, and accident.

In Arabic usage, a body is that which is composed and composite. This is indicated by such expressions as “a man of large body” and “Zayd is larger-bodied than ‘Amr.” The word belongs to a morphological class expressing intensity, and there is agreement that the intensified meaning of a noun is derived from the noun’s basic meaning. This is shown by the expression “one who strikes repeatedly.” If it indicates frequent striking, then the expression “one who strikes” must indicate striking. Likewise, if being composed and composite indicates a multiplicity of combination and composition, then the word “body” must also indicate this meaning.

A substance is that which occupies a spatial locus. A spatial locus is a place, or that which is treated as a place insofar as something else may be found in it.

An accident is that which occurs in a substance and cannot remain for two moments. This is indicated by the Arabic expression, “An occurrence befell so-and-so, such as an illness or a headache,” when its disappearance is near and its continuance is not expected.

The same usage appears in God’s words, mighty and majestic is he: “You desire the transient goods of this world, while God desires the Hereafter”; and “This is a cloud that will bring us rain.” Everything whose nonexistence and disappearance are near is described in this way. The entities subsisting in bodies have this property. Rational judgment therefore requires that they be described as accidents.

7. One must know that the world is originated and that neither its upper nor its lower region is ever anything other than a composite body, an individual substance, or a borne accident. The world in its entirety is originated. This is known by establishing the origination of its bodies and accidents.

The evidence that its accidents are real is that a body moves after being at rest, separates after being combined, changes from one state to another, and passes from one attribute to another. If it moved through itself and changed by its essence, it would have to move while at rest and to change while remaining in equilibrium. Since this is impossible, the body’s motion, rest, colors, spatial states, and other attributes must be affirmed. For if it does not possess a given state through itself, then its departure from one state and transition to another attribute must be due to some entity.

The evidence that these accidents are originated lies in their mutual incompatibility and opposition. If they were all beginningless, they would always have existed and would always continue to do so. Whenever motion was present in a body, rest would therefore also have to be present in it. The body would then be moving while at rest and dead while alive. Since this is impossible, rest must occur after not existing and motion must cease when rest occurs. Whatever occurs after not existing, and whatever becomes nonexistent after existing, is originated by agreement. What is beginningless does not come to be, become nonexistent, or cease.

The evidence that bodies are originated is that they neither precede originated events nor are ever devoid of them. For we know necessarily

that a body is never without colors and the entities constituting spatial states, such as combination and separation. Whatever is inseparable from originated things and does not precede them is itself originated. If it does not precede them, it exists either simultaneously with them or after them. Whichever is the case, it must be judged originated and nonexistent prior to its existence.

8. One must know that the world has an originator who originated it. The evidence is that originated events occur in an order of earlier and later, even though the earlier could have been delayed and the later advanced. An event cannot be earlier or later through itself, since being earlier is no more intrinsic to it than being later. It must therefore indicate an agent who brought it about, assigned it its place in existence according to his will, and made its occurrence depend exclusively on his volition, advancing whichever events he wills and delaying whichever he wills.

God, most high, says, “He does whatever he wills,” and, “When We will a thing, our only word to it is that We say, ‘Be,’ and it is.”

Our knowledge that an act, insofar as it is an act, is related to an agent also demonstrates this, just as an agent, insofar as he is an agent, is related to an act. Writing is related to a writer, and a craft to an artisan, just as a writer is related to writing precisely insofar as he is a writer. If an act without an agent, writing without a writer, or an originated form and structure without one who formed them could exist, then a writer without writing and an artisan without a craft could also exist. Since this is impossible, an act must entail and indicate an agent, just as an agent’s being an agent entails the existence of an act proceeding from him.

Among the attributes of this maker, exalted is he, are that he is existent, beginningless, one, unique, living, knowing, powerful, willing, speaking, hearing, seeing, and everlasting. “Nothing is like him, and he is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.”

We shall demonstrate this later, God willing, after beginning with the duties of morally responsible persons and the ordinances of Muslims. These are matters readily understood, which one should not be ignorant of and which a morally responsible person must know and act <upon>. Once we have completed this summary, we shall return to divine unity, the establishment of God’s names and attributes, and what may and may not be predicated of him. My success comes only from God.

GLOSSARY OF TECHNICAL TERMS

The following terms recur in the argument. The English forms are translation controls, not claims that each Arabic word has only one possible equivalent.

Accident *‘araḍ*. An entity that inheres in a substance and, in the account adopted here, cannot remain for two moments.

Acquisition *kasb*. The servant’s deliberate relation to an act created by God. It is distinguished from both autonomous human creation and compulsion.

Beginningless *qadīm*. Having no temporal beginning. The term is used for God and his essential attributes.

Body *jism*. A composed and composite corporeal entity.

Capacity *istiṭā’a*. Created ability. In the main argument it exists concurrently with the act and is distinguished from divine power.

Communal obligation *farḍ kifāya*. A duty discharged for the community when a sufficient number of its members perform it.

Divine oneness *tawhīd*. Affirmation that God is one and incomparable, together with the affirmation of his attributes and the denial of what is unworthy of him.

Evidence *dalīl*. That through the sound examination of which one reaches knowledge beyond immediate cognition. The English ‘proof’ is used when conclusiveness is foregrounded.

Faith *īmān*. Assent in the heart, confessed by the tongue and manifested in action through divine granting of success.

Grasping apprehension *idrāk*. Comprehensive apprehension. In the final chapter it is distinguished from bare seeing and associated with encompassing.

Imamate *imāma*. The institution of supreme communal leadership. ‘Caliphate’ is used for succession, tenure, or the historically ordered officeholders.

Individual obligation *farḍ ‘ayn*. A duty borne by every morally responsible individual.

Inference *istidlāl*. Reasoning from evidence in search of knowledge beyond immediate cognition and sense perception.

Inner speech *al-kalām al-qā’im bi-l-nafs*. Speech or meaning subsisting within the self and indicated by sounds, letters, writing, symbols, and gestures without being identical with them.

Intercession *shafā'a*. A Prophetic or angelic petition on behalf of another, with its recipient and effect determined by the local argument.

Necessary knowledge *ʿilm al-ḍarūra*. Immediate cognition that imposes itself and cannot be repelled or doubted.

Object of knowledge *ma'lūm*. That which is known. In the work's taxonomy this includes both existent and nonexistent objects.

Object of power *maqḍūr*. That to which power relates.

Object of will *murād*. That to which will relates.

Originated *ḥādith or muḥdath*. That which did not exist and then came to be.

Originator *muḥdith*. The agent who brings an originated thing into existence.

Rational inquiry *naẓar*. Deliberative examination directed toward attaining knowledge.

Seeing God *ru'yat Allāh*. The rationally possible and scripturally promised seeing of God by believers, without modality, likeness, or spatial delimitation.

Spatial direction *jīha*. A directional framework to which confinement of God is denied.

Spatial locus *ḥayyiz*. A place, or what is treated as a place, occupied by another thing.

Spatial state *kawn*. A body's state of location, such as combination, separation, movement, or rest.

Specification *takhṣīṣ*. The determination of an originated event for one time, place, form, or attribute rather than another.

Substance *jawhar*. That which occupies a spatial locus. 'Atom' is avoided unless individuation is independently established by the passage.

Sunna *sunna*. The transmitted teaching and practice of the Messenger, treated as the second revealed evidentiary path.

Will *irāda*. The divine attribute by which originated events are specified. It must remain distinct from command, approval, love, and praise where the argument distinguishes them.