

## Scope of Iḥbāt: A Critical Perspective from Imami and Sunni Viewpoints

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of iḥbāt (nullification of deeds) is a foundational topic in the field of Islamic theology (kalām) that elucidates the relationship between faith (īmān), righteous deeds ('amal ṣāliḥ), and eschatological felicity. It stands in contrast to the eternal damnation resulting from disbelief (kufr) and sin (ma'ṣiyat). The central point of disagreement in this domain concerns the nature and modality of how iḥbāt is actualized. The objective of this research is to analyze and examine three theological perspectives on the issue of iḥbāt in relation to the reckoning of deeds, divine wisdom (ḥikmah), and divine justice ('adl)—a subject that has perpetually been a site of debate and discourse among theologians (mutakallimūn). Accordingly, this article emphasizes the Imāmī perspective and compares it with the views of the Ahl al-Sunnah, particularly the Mu'tazilah. The research methodology is descriptive-analytical, grounded in documentary sources and library-based data. The findings indicate that, according to the Imāmī view, the denial of iḥbāt and its metaphorical interpretation (tafsīr majāzī) possess greater soundness (itqān), based on arguments from the Qur'an and narrative traditions (riwāyāt). Conversely, the Mu'tazilah affirm the literal meaning of iḥbāt and are divided into two factions: one that upholds the total nullification (iḥbāt kullī) of deeds, and another that proposes the theory of partial nullification (iḥbāt juz'ī) and a counterbalancing (muwāzanah) between good deeds (ḥasanāt) and evil deeds (sayyi'āt). Through a documented analysis of these three viewpoints, the final conclusion affirms the Imāmī position, which involves the negation of the total nullification of deeds and an emphasis on divine justice and wisdom in matters of reward and punishment.

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## Introduction

A fundamental issue in Islamic theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) and ethics is the intricate interplay between righteous and sinful acts in determining an individual's ultimate eschatological fate. This inquiry delves into the mechanisms through which human deeds interact, a subject extensively debated by classical Islamic scholars. Central to this discourse are the twin concepts of *iḥbāt* (nullification) and *takfīr* (expiatory compensation). *Iḥbāt* denotes the annulment or invalidation of the reward for previously accumulated good deeds due to subsequent major sins or disbelief. Conversely, *takfīr* refers to the effacement or compensation for sins through righteous acts, effectively shielding the believer from their negative consequences. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of these doctrines, examining the divergent viewpoints within major Islamic theological schools, particularly Imāmī Shī‘a and Sunni orthodoxy, while also acknowledging the philosophical and mystical dimensions that enrich this complex debate.

## Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology, grounded in the examination of primary and authoritative secondary sources within the Islamic theological tradition. The investigation focuses on the doctrinal positions concerning *iḥbāt* and *takfīr* as a central challenge in Islamic theology, exploring its intrinsic connections with divine wisdom (*ḥikma ilāhiyya*), eschatology (*ma‘ād*), the final reckoning of deeds (*ḥisāb*), and divine justice (*‘adl*). The core of the study revolves around the points of contention and consensus among Imāmī and Sunni theologians regarding the actual occurrence of *iḥbāt* and its perceived compatibility or incompatibility with God's justice and wisdom.

## Findings

The analysis reveals a spectrum of theological opinions:

- **The Imāmī Shī‘a Perspective:** This school posits that faith and righteous deeds merit divine reward only if sustained until the end of one's life. A subsequent act of disbelief (*kufr*) or major sin (*kabīra*) retroactively demonstrates a lack of genuine, enduring faith, thus nullifying the reward for prior good works. In this view, *iḥbāt* is understood in a metaphorical, rather than a literal, sense (as cited from al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, al-Ṭabrisī, and al-Baḥrānī).

- **Sunni Theological Perspectives:** Four primary viewpoints were identified within Sunni schools:

1. **Nullification of Reward:** Major sins or disbelief can entirely invalidate the accrued reward of previous good deeds (al-Ghazālī; al-Taftāzānī).
2. **Negation of Minor Good Deeds:** Major sins specifically nullify minor good deeds (*ḥasanāt qalīla*) but not necessarily all forms of worship (al-Ījī; al-Ḥillī; al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār).
3. **Total Nullification of All Righteous Acts:** A later major sin irrevocably invalidates all preceding righteous acts, regardless of their magnitude—a view primarily associated with the Khārijīs, particularly the Ibādīs (al-Juwaynī).
4. **The Theory of Weighing (Muwāzana):** Championed by Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī, this theory holds that an individual's good and evil deeds are weighed against each other. The outcome (reward or punishment) is determined by which category prevails; if equal, they nullify each other. This calculation encompasses one's entire lifetime of deeds (al-Ījī; al-Jurjānī; al-Baḥrānī).

### Conclusion

The study concludes with several key insights:

1. **Definition of *Iḥbāt*:** *Iḥbāt* is accurately defined as the eradication of the *deserved reward* for good deeds, not the physical annihilation of the deeds themselves.
2. **Critique of the Mu‘tazilite Position:** A strict interpretation of *iḥbāt*, as held by some Mu‘tazilites, leads to a simplistic model of deeds cyclically nullifying one another, which is an inadequate reflection of the complex reality of divine judgment as presented in scripture.
3. **Viability of the Weighing Theory:** The theory of *muwāzana* emerges as a more nuanced and logically coherent framework for understanding the interaction of deeds.
4. **Scriptural Fidelity:** Qur’ānic and ḥadīth evidence confirms that a believer with a mixture of good and evil deeds is fundamentally distinct from one with no good deeds whatsoever. Divine justice may entail punishment for sins preceding the eventual bestowal of reward for good deeds—a position directly opposing the absolute nullification theory.

Ultimately, the precise mechanics of how deeds are reconciled remain within the purview of divine wisdom (*ḥikma*), leaving humankind in a state between hope and fear, which itself is a cornerstone of ethical and spiritual motivation in Islam.

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