

The Role of the Interpretation of Conflicting Narrations
as a Branch in Ḥadīth Criticism Studies

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Assignment question:

The Role of the Interpretation of Conflicting Narrations as a Branch in Ḥadīth Criticism Studies: Elaborate on the importance of the science of Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth explaining the outlines of this field and presenting the scholar's effort through their books and remarks. Support the paper with enough examples expounding the application of its science on Ḥadīth criticism.

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Abstract

This research paper examines the field of Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth, also known as the interpretation of seemingly contradicting aḥadīth.

Among the thousands of aḥadīth which have been reported and recorded until today, there are many aḥadīth which seemingly contradict one another. These contradictions may confuse the reader who doesn't know about the science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth.

The science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth is a branch of Ḥadīth criticism in which seemingly contradictory aḥadīth are explained. Many scholars have attempted to propose some principles and methods on how to explain these aḥadīth in a way that they no longer contradict one another by jam' (reconciliation), tarjīḥ (preference of one Ḥadīth over another), or naskh (abrogation). Each of these methods has certain principles to it so they may be applied.

In this research paper, the field of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth will be defined. Then, some classical books regarding the interpretation of seemingly contradictory will be mentioned. Finally, the main principles and methods for the interpretation of these aḥadīth will be elaborated with examples.

Keywords: mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth, Hadith criticism, conflicting hadith, ibn Qutaybah, mushkil al-Ḥadīth

Introduction

All praise belongs to Allāh, the Lord of the worlds, and blessings and peace be upon our Prophet Muḥammad, his companions, his family and those who follow his path until the Last Day.

Considering the large number of aḥādīth, it is not a surprise that there seem to be some contradictions between some aḥādīth. These contradictions are mostly not real contradictions but can be explained in one way or another. However, for the reader who is ignorant of the science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth, it may seem that there are contradictions in the aḥādīth which cannot be explained and, thus showing that the Sunnah may be wrong or false. The truth is far away from what they may claim.

In reality, those contradictions are not real contradictions. They can be explained by reconciliation (jam'), tarjīh (preference of one Ḥadīth over another) or naskh (abrogation). It is important to understand these methods and their principles in order to understand why certain aḥādīth are not applied or why certain aḥādīth need to be understood in their metaphorical sense rather than their literal sense.

In this research paper, the most important matters regarding mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth will be elaborated on in three sections.

Section 1: The outlines of the science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth will be explained.

Section 2: A historical view of the books and works by the scholars who were involved in this science will be outlined.

Section 3: The main methods of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth will be explained shortly with some examples to make clear what the science is about.

May Allāh allow us to increase our understanding of aḥādīth and its science through this research paper. Ameen.

Outlines of the Science of Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth

The term mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth consists of two parts, namely mukhtalaf and al-Ḥadīth.

Mukhtalaf is derived from the word khalafa. The word khalafa has many meanings, but it can mean “to conflict, clash”, “to contradict”, “to be different, differ”, or “to be inconsistent, incompatible”. (Wehr, 2001)

Ḥadīth refers to the statements, actions, descriptions, and approvals of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ.

Therefore, the science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth is the science by which scholars attempt to explain seemingly contradictory aḥadīth. It is one of the most important fields of Ḥadīth criticism due to various reasons. It shows that there are no real contradictions in the Sunnah and that we can explain all (or at least most) of the apparent contradictions. It also allows us to understand which Ḥadīth we should act upon and which aḥadīth should be understood in a literal sense and which aḥadīth should be understood in a metaphorical sense, and much more.

Aḥadīth that appear to contradict each other must first be checked for authenticity. If one of the seemingly contradictory aḥadīth is fabricated (mawḍū') or weak (ḍa'īf), the matter is clear and the authentic narration will be accepted and the fabricated or weak narration will be rejected.

The scholars have mentioned regarding the real contradiction: “It is the complete contradiction between two arguments which are equal in significance, proof, and number, and united in time and place.” (al-Sūsawah, 1997)

The real and complete contradiction can only happen when four conditions are fulfilled:

1. Complete contradiction between the two narrations.

2. Authenticity of the contradicting narrations.
3. Equality between the contradicting narrations.
4. Unity in time and place of the contradicting narrations (i.e. they mention something that happened at the same time and the same place).

However, there is a difference of opinion if this kind of contradiction can actually happen. (al-Sūsawah, 1997)

In most, if not all, cases, the contradiction can be explained by either of the three main methods postulated by scholars. This will be discussed in the third section, in shā Allāh.

Historical Overview of some of the Works in this Field

The first scholar to have written a book about mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth was Imām Shāfi'ī (born in Gaza in the year 150 H, died in 204 H) with his book *Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth*. (al-Shafi'i, 2008)

Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawārī (born in Kufa in the year 213 H, died in Baghdad in 276) wrote a book called *Ta'wīl Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth*. This book is frequently studied by students of knowledge. (ibn Qutaybah, 1999)

The largest work from the 3rd century, however, was written by Imām Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥḥāwī (born in Taha Al Amidah in the year 239 H, died in Cairo in 321 H) and is known under the title *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*. In the 16 volumes of this book, Imām al- Ṭaḥḥāwī does not only mention his own explanations of these aḥādīth but also the view of the scholars of his time. (al-Tahhawi, 1994)

A book that was written a century later was *Mushkil al-Ḥadīth wa Bayānuhu* written by Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak al-Anshārī al-Asbahānī who died in the year 406 H. (ibn Furak, 1985)

These works focus more on the practical application of the methods of explaining seemingly conflicting aḥādīth. They were printed and available to us today.

A contemporary work that explained the theoretical framework well was written by Dr. ‘Abdul-Majīd Muḥammad Ismā’īl al-Sūsawah. (al-Sūsawah, 1997)

Another work was written by Nāfiẓ Ḥusayn Ḥammād which is known as Mukhtalaf al-ḥadīth bayna al-fuqahā’ wa-al-muḥaddithīn. (Hammad, 2009)

In addition to those works which were specifically written about the science of mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth, there is a lot of information that we find in books written about other subjects as well written by great scholars like Imām Nawawi and others.

The Main Methods of Explaining Seemingly Contradictory Aḥādīth

Jam’ (Reconciliation)

The first main method of explaining seemingly contradictory aḥādīth is by using jam’ (reconciliation). In this method, both aḥādīth are fully acknowledged and accepted, none of them is more or less applicable than the other. (al-Sūsawah, 1997) (Philips, 2007)

Jam’ can be used when one Ḥadīth is ‘ām (general) and the other one is khāṣṣ (specific).

Example:

- Anas reported Allāh's Apostle ﷺ disapproved the drinking of water while standing. (Saḥīḥ Muslim, 2024a)
- It was narrated that Ibn Abbas said: "I gave the Messenger of Allāh some Zamzam to drink and he drank it while standing." (Sunan an-Nasā’ī, 2965)

The first Ḥadīth is general concerning any type of drink. However, the second Ḥadīth is specific regarding Zamzam water. Therefore, we can make jam’ here and say that one should act upon both aḥādīth.

Jam' can also be used when similar aḥadīth were narrated regarding different occasions.

Example:

- 'Ā'ishah narrated: The Prophet (ﷺ) never missed four rak`āt before the zuhr prayer and two rak`āt before the fajr prayer. (Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 1182)
- Ibn 'Umar narrated: "I prayed two rak'āt with the Prophet ﷺ before zuhr and two rak'āt after it." (Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī, 425)

The scholars have explained that 'Ā'ishah narrated what she saw the Prophet ﷺ doing at home, while ibn 'Umar narrated what he saw the Prophet ﷺ doing at the masjid.

Therefore, we can say that we should act upon both of these aḥadīth and pray four rak'āt before zuhr when praying at home and two rak'āt before zuhr when praying at the masjid.

Tarjīḥ (Preferring one Ḥadīth over another)

Another method used by scholars is tarjīḥ, i.e. preferring one Ḥadīth over another Ḥadīth. This method can be applied when one narration is stronger than the other in its chain of narration (sanad). There are several principles that facilitate knowing which Ḥadīth should be preferred among which are:

1. The condition and righteousness of the narrators.
2. By the number of narrators. (al-Sūsawah, 1997)

It can also be applied with regard to the text (matn) of the Ḥadīth:

1. Literal aḥadīth are preferred over metaphorical aḥadīth.
2. Clear aḥadīth are preferred over implicit aḥadīth.
3. Affirmative evidence is preferred over the negative.
4. Prohibition is preferred over permissibility. (Philips, 2007)

5. Aḥadīth where the ‘illah (reason) for its ḥukm (ruling) is mentioned is preferred over that Ḥadīth where the ‘illah (reason) is not mentioned. (al-Sūsawah, 1997)

Example:

- Abū Hurayrah narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Perform ablution after (eating) that which has been changed by fire." Ibn 'Abbās said: "Should I do ablution after (touching) hot water?" Abū Hurayrah said: "O son of my brother, when I narrate a Ḥadīth of the Messenger of Allāh to you, then do not try to make examples for it." (Sunan ibn Mājah, 485)
- Zuhri said: "I had dinner with Walid or Abdul-Mālik. When the time for prayer came, I got up to perform ablution. Ja'far bin 'Amr bin Umayyah said: 'I bear witness that my father bore witness, that the Messenger of Allāh ate food that had been changed by fire, then he performed prayer, and he did not perform ablution.' (ṣaḥīḥ) And 'Alī bin 'Abdullāh bin 'Abbās said: 'And I bear witness to similar from my father.'" (Sunan ibn Mājah, 490)

Based on the number of narrators of high level of understanding and memory of these aḥadīth, the second one is preferred over the first Ḥadīth by the majority of the scholars. (Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī, 79)

Naskh (Abrogation)

Another method of explaining seemingly contradicting aḥadīth is by naskh (abrogation). In this case, one Ḥadīth, which came at an earlier time, is abrogated (mansūkh) by another Ḥadīth that came later (nāsikh). However, there are conditions for this method as one cannot just claim that one Ḥadīth has abrogated another without evidence.

There are four ways by which one can recognise of a Ḥadīth was abrogated or not.

1. It was clearly mentioned by Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ which Ḥadīth is the nāsikh and which Ḥadīth is mansūkh.
2. It was clearly mentioned by a Saḥābī which Ḥadīth is the nāsikh and which Ḥadīth is mansūkh.
3. It is known when the two incidents happened which led to contradicting aḥadīth.
4. The Saḥābah agreed upon which Ḥadīth is the nāsikh and which Ḥadīth is mansūkh.

Example:

Ibn Mas'ūd reported that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, "I had prohibited you from visiting graves, but you may visit them now. Verily, they will weaken your attachment to the world and remind you of the Hereafter." (Sunan Ibn Mājah, 1571)

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth is one of the most important sciences of Ḥadīth criticism. It allows us to understand those aḥadīth which seemingly contradict each other, to remove doubt and ignorance, and to increase our understanding of the Sunnah.

The scholars have contributed a lot to this field which can be seen in their enormous works about the seemingly contradicting aḥadīth.

Allāhu A'lam.

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