

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah’s Approach to the Sunnah

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Assignment question:

Please write on Imām Abū Ḥanīfah’s Approach to the Sunnah

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Abstract

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah is known for his unique approach to the Sunnah. This approach was to some part the response to the situation at the place and time he lived in, which will be discussed in this research paper.

His approach has earned him some criticism which is – to the most part – not justified.

However, the research paper will shed light what approach Imām Abū Ḥanīfah used and what some of the criticism and accusations were, that were brought forward against him.

In order to have a good, authentic, and comprehensive understanding of what Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach was, I will use some of the classical works of the Hanafi madhhab and some works of contemporary scholars of comparative fiqh and hadith sciences.

This research paper is divided into two parts. Firstly, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's expertise will be discussed very briefly. Secondly, the research paper will summarize Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach to aḥādīth and mention some of the criticism levelled against him with a brief critical analysis of whether or not those allegations were justified.

Keywords: Sunnah, Hadith, Abū Ḥanīfah, Usool ul-Fiqh

Introduction

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, the founder of the Hanafī madhhab, was called an-Nu'mān ibn Thābit ibn Zūtā. He was the first of the great Imāms to be born, to form his madhhab, and he has the most followers. He was born most likely in the year 80 H in Kufa and died in the year 150 H in Baghdad. (as-Sibā'ee, 2008)

His greatest teacher was Ḥammād ibn Zayd, one of the greatest hadith scholars of his time, under whom he studied for 18 years. After Ḥammād ibn Zayd died, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah became the prominent scholar of his time in Kufa. He was one of the minor Tabi'īn because he had met a few Sahābah and learned some aḥadīth from them. (Philips, 2006)

Some of the greatest students of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah include Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī who had a great impact on the formation of the Ḥanafī madhhab and overruled many of the rulings given by Imām Abū Ḥanīfah. (Philips, 2006)

This research paper is divided into the following sections:

Section 1: The expertise that Imām Abū Ḥanīfah had in hadith sciences will be briefly described.

Section 2: The approach to aḥadīth and their acceptance will be elaborated, focusing on those aspects that are unique to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah such as his acceptance of mursal aḥadīth and the condition of mashhūr.

May Allah help us to get a better understanding of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach to the Sunnah and how he used the Sunnah in his fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Ameen.

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's Expertise Regarding the Sunnah

As mentioned in the introduction to this research paper, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's greatest teacher was Ḥammād ibn Zayd, one of the greatest hadith scholars of his time. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah studied under him for 18 years. Furthermore, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah was able to meet some of the Saḥābah and learned some aḥādīth from them as well.

However, some critics have accused Imām Abū Ḥanīfah of having known only about 150 aḥādīth or even only 17 aḥādīth. (as-Sibâ'ee, 2008) This claim, considering the fact that he was Ḥammād ibn Zayd's student of 18 years, is obviously false. In fact, there is a musnad that was attributed to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, which contains about 500 aḥādīth. These aḥādīth were written down by the students of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and is one of the very earliest hadith collections that have reached us. (al-Asbhani, 1994)

Furthermore, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah was one of the greatest scholars and he lived in Kufa which was one of the greatest centers of knowledge at his time. Many Saḥābah had moved to Baghdad and Kufa due to socio-political reasons. (Philips, 2006) Therefore, it is not possible that he only knew such a small number of aḥādīth.

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's Approach to Hadith

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach to hadith classification differed from that of the muḥaddithīn in several ways. This will be further discussed in this section, in shā Allāh.

Classification of hadith based on the number of narrators

Mutawātir: This is the hadith that has been narrated by so many people that there is no doubt that it is true and correct. The scholars differ regarding what the number of narrators should be, but they agree on the fact that a mutawātir hadith is authentic and reliable without

a doubt, i.e. it establishes 'ilm qat'i (definite knowledge). The Aḥnāf usually mention 10 narrators at each link of the sanad (chain of narration).

Mashhūr: This is the hadith that was narrated by one Sahabi, but had between three and ten narrators in the second or third era. (al-Shashi, 2008) This classification is unique to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and not known in any of the other madhahib.

The introduction of the mashhūr classification had a reason. Kufa and Baghdad were the birthplaces of fabricated aḥādīth. At the same time, hadith collections such as Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī or Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim did not yet exist, which could have facilitated hadith criticism. Therefore, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah had to take measures to ensure that he would not use a fabricated hadith, so he introduced the principle of mashhūr (well-known) hadith, so he could use the hadith without fearing that it was fabricated.

The mashhūr hadith, according to the Hanafī madhhab, establishes 'ilm ṭam'anīnah (tranquil knowledge). Therefore, even though some doubt may remain, the hadith is accepted.

Āḥād: This is the hadith that was narrated by only one person to another person. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah set some conditions for the acceptance of single (āḥād) aḥādīth. These are that they must not contradict the Qur'ān, any mashhūr or mutawātir hadith, or the apparent norms of society. (al-Shashi, 2008)

Categories of narrators

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah categorized the Saḥābah into two groups:

1. Those who were well-known for their knowledge and their ijtihād. This includes Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar, Zayd bin Thābit, Mu'ādh ibn Jabal, 'Ā'ishah and others.

The narrations from them, even though they may be single (āḥād) hadith or simply

their ijtihād, is better than acting upon qiyas, according to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah. (al-Shashi, 2008)

2. Those who are well-known for their knowledge, but not for their ijtihād. This includes Abū Hurayrah and Anas bin Mālik. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah would prefer qiyās over their single (āḥād) narrations and ijtihād. (al-Shashi, 2008)

Some critics accused Imām Abū Ḥanīfah of giving preference to qiyās over aḥādīth. However, this accusation is not in line with reality.

First of all, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah had to be very cautious which aḥādīth he would apply. Therefore, he had only a relatively small number of aḥādīth that he could use. Secondly, he was living in Kufa, where new customs were seen, which the Muslims had never seen before and about which no clear hadith was mentioned. Therefore, he was often forced to use legal deductions (qiyās) to come to any conclusion regarding a matter. Furthermore, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah was the first to use qiyas. Therefore, it was very new for the people until other Imāms like Imām Malik used qiyās as well.

The novelty of qiyās made some people think that he would give preference to qiyās or his own opinion over aḥādīth.

One of the reasons why Imām Abū Ḥanīfah considered qiyās more reliable than the isolated (āḥād) aḥādīth of Saḥābah like Abū Hurayrah is the narration narrated by Abū Hurayrah and collected by ibn Mājah, Tirmidhī, and Abū Dāwūd:

It was narrated from Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet 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 Hadith of the Messenger of Allah to you, then do not try to make examples for it." (Sunan ibn Mājah, 485)

The Aḥnāf argue that if ibn 'Abbās had had a hadith about not performing wuḍū after eating anything that was changed by fire, he would have mentioned it. However, since he had no hadīth to refute this claim, he used qiyās. Hence, qiyās will be applicable. (al-Shashi, 2008)

The majority of scholars reject acting upon this hadith. (Jami' al-Tirmidhi, 79)

Mursal hadith

Another unique attribute of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach to the Sunnah is his acceptance of mursal aḥadīth. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, just like Imām Malik and Imām Ahmad, accepted mursal aḥadīth on the condition that the one at the beginning of the sanad (after the Sahabi who was left out) is reliable and trustworthy himself and that he was known to have normally narrated only from reliable sources. (Philips, 2007) (Al-Ṭaḥān, 2010)

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Imām Abū Ḥanīfah's approach to the Sunnah was unique but with very good reasons. He was well versed in hadith sciences and very cautious about accepting aḥadīth has evidence (ḥujjah).

The careful use of aḥadīth has led to differences of opinions between the madhāhib. However, due to the science of hadith criticism, the Hanafī madhhab has now opened up to āḥād aḥadīth to be evidence (ḥujjah) if they can be established as authentic (ṣaḥīḥ). (Uthmani, 2011)

And Allāh knows best.

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