Principles of Determining the Hadith

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Aḥādīth (plural of Ḥadīth) are narratives which record the words, deeds and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad (sws). They are mostly *akhbār-i aḥād* (isolate reports). It is absolutely evident that they do not add to the contents of religion stated in the Qur'ān and Sunnah. In technical terms, they do not add any article of faith or any deed to religion. In other words, it is outside the scope of Aḥādīth to give an independent directive not covered by the Qur'ān and Sunnah. However, this is also a reality that the Ḥadīth literature is the largest and most important source which records the biography, history and the exemplary life of the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) as well as his invaluable explanations of various issues of religion. Thus it occupies such great importance that no student of religion can ignore it. It is because of this importance of Ḥadīth that it is essential to know the principles which help us in understanding them.

Before elaborating on these principles, we will first have a look at the principles on the basis of which a Ḥadīth is accepted or rejected.

The Chain of Narration of Ḥadith

It is the chain of narration of a narrative which makes it a Ḥadīth that can be attributed to the Prophet (sws). In addition to any hidden flaws in the chain of narration of a Ḥadīth, the trustworthiness of the narrators, their memory and the contemporaneousness of the narrators are the three standards which should be kept in consideration in the light of the material which the scholars of Ḥadīth have painstakingly made available. This is the standard which scholars of Ḥadīth have put forth for the examination of the chain of narration of a Ḥadīth, and is so sound that no addition can be made to it nor anything taken away

from it.

Since attributing something suspect to the Prophet (sws) can be of severe consequences in this world and in that to come, it is necessary to apply this standard without any lenience and with absolute impartiality to every narrative attributed to him. Only those narratives should be considered acceptable which fully conform to this standard.[1] Thus no narrative attributed to the Prophet (sws) even if found in primary works as the *al-Jāmi al-Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi al-Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim and the *Mu'aṭṭā* of Imām Mālik can be accepted without application of this standard.

Text of a Ḥadīth

After investigating the chain of narration of a Ḥadīth, the second thing which requires investigation is the text of a Ḥadīth. Although scholars of Ḥadīth have left no stone unturned in investigating the characters and biographies of the narrators and have spent a greater part of their lives in this research, yet like every human endeavour, the natural flaws which still exist in the narration of a Ḥadīth[2] requires that the following two things must always remain in consideration while investigating the text of a Ḥadīth:

1. Nothing in it should be against the Qur'ān and Sunnah
2. Nothing in it should be against established facts derived from knowledge and reason

It has already been explained that in religion the Qur'ān is the *mīzān* (the scale of truth) and the *furqān* (the distinguisher between truth and falsehood). It is like a guardian of every religious concept and it has been revealed as a barometer to judge between what is right and what is wrong. Thus no further explanation is required of the fact that if anything is against the Qur'ān, then it must stand rejected.

Similar is the case of the Sunnah. Whatever religion has been

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1. The soundness of character of the Companions of the Prophet (sws), however is an exception and does not need the conformation of any standard. The Almighty Himself has borne witness to it in His Book. See The Qur'ān, 3:110.

2. For details see: Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, *Mabādī Tadabbur-i Ḥadīth*, 1st ed., Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1991.

received through it is as certain and authentic as the Qur'ān, as has already been explained earlier. There is no difference between the level of authenticity of the two. Just as the Qur'ān is validated thought the consensus of the *ummah*, the Sunnah is also determined from its consensus. Since this fact is an absolute reality about the Sunnah, thus if a Ḥadīth is against the Sunnah and if there is no way out to resolve a conflict between the two, the Ḥadīth in consideration must necessarily be rejected.

Established facts derived from knowledge and reason also have the same status in this regard. The Qur'ān is absolutely clear that its message is based on these established facts. Its arguments on such basic issues as *tawḥīd* and the Hereafter are primarily based on these facts. It is the requirements and demands of these facts which the Qur'ān highlights through its teachings. Every student of the Qur'ān is aware that it presents these facts as deciding factors for the message it puts forth. It presented them as the final word both before the Idolaters of Arabia and the People of the Book. Those who oppose these are regarded by it as people who follow their base desires. Thus intuitive realities, historical truths, results of experience and observation – all are discussed in the Qur'ān in this very capacity. Hence how can a Ḥadīth which is against these facts regarded by the Qur'ān as ones which distinguish between the truth and untruth be accepted? It is obvious that it shall stand rejected. All leading scholars of Ḥadīth also hold this view. Khaṭīb writes:

A *khabr-i wāḥid* cannot be accepted which is against sense and intellect, is against an established and explicit directive of the Qur'ān, is against a known Sunnah or is against a practice which is observed like the Sunnah or its conflict with some conclusive argument becomes absolutely evident.[3]

Let us now take a look at the principles of understanding the

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3. Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwayah*, (Madīnah: al-Maktbah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 432.

Ḥadīth:

Literary Appreciation of the Arabic Language

Just as the Qur'ān has been revealed in highly literary Arabic, the language of the Ḥadīth too is highly literary Arabic. There is no doubt that a great number of Aḥādīth have not been transmitted in their original words, yet whatever much has been preserved of the language of the Prophet (sws) and his Companions (rta) is still enough for a keen student of the Qur'ān to distinguish it from other material. Like the Qur'ān, the language of the Ḥadīth too has a certain standard which does not accept any adulteration of material substandard to it. Thus it is necessary that by a continuous study of its language, students of Ḥadīth are able to acquire enough skill of the language so as to reject narratives like   [4] on the very basis of the language used in it. Similarly, they should have no problems in understanding the rather difficult style used in   [5]. This skill is also required to solve difficulties posed by the syntax and morphology of the Arabic language. A person should have a deep study of what the authorities of these subjects have written. No one is able to solve the difficulties of Ḥadīth unless he is cognizant of the delicacies of the Arabic language and its various styles and constructions.

Interpretation in the Light of the Qur'ān

The Ḥadīth should be interpreted in the light of the Qur'ān. The status occupied by the Qur'ān has already been alluded to earlier. It is the most definite and authentic record of whatever Muḥammad (sws) did in his status of a prophet and a messenger. Consequently, most topics covered in the Ḥadīth are related to the Qur'ān the way a branch is related to a stem or the way an explanation is related to the text it explains. Without a recourse to the original text, it is obvious that its corollaries and explanations cannot be understood. If all the mistakes in interpreting the Ḥadīth are minutely analyzed, this situation becomes abundantly clear. The incidents of stoning to death in the times of the Prophet (sws), the assassination of Ka'b Ibn Ashraf, punishment meted out in the graves, narratives of

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4. *Mu'aṭṭā*, No: 1506.
5. *Muslim*, No: 1690.

intercession and directives as   and (I have been directed to wage war against these people)[6]

(Execute the person who changes his faith)[7] have become issues which have caused a lot of confusion and have been subjected to misinterpretation because they have not been understood by relating them to their basis in the Qur'ān.

In short, if this principal is kept in consideration, a lot of perplexities are resolved in understanding the Ḥadīth.

Understanding the Occasion of the Ḥadīth

A Ḥadīth must be understood with reference to the instance and occasion of the topic it records. What was the occasion on which it was said? What was the background in which it was said? Who were the addressees? If one does not address these questions in interpreting a Ḥadīth, on many occasions one fails to get to the right interpretation. The Ḥadīth   (The rulers will be from the Quraysh)[8] is a famous narrative. By the apparent words of this Ḥadīth, scholars of our *ummah* have been led to believe that a Muslim ruler must always be from among the tribe of the Quraysh. If this is accepted then at least with reference to the political system there remains no difference between Islam and Brahmanism. The basic reason in misinterpreting this Ḥadīth is the fact that this statement of the Prophet (sws) related to the political situation which was to arise right after him; instead of understanding this aspect, the directive stated in it was regarded to be an independent directive of religion applicable for all times. There are numerous such Aḥādīth in religion and they cover very important topics. It is essential that they be understood by keeping in consideration this principle.

Study of all the Variant Texts

All the variant texts of a Ḥadīth must be studied in order to form an opinion about it. Many a time a person may form an opinion about a Ḥadīth by not studying its variants; however, once he deliberates on all the variants his overall interpretation changes. One glaring example of this are the Aḥādīth which

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6. *Muslim*, No: 21.
7. *Bukhārī*, No: 2854.
8. *Musnad Aḥmad*, No: 12329.

mention the prohibition of pictures and portraits. If some of the narratives are studied only, one can easily conclude that this prohibition is absolute and every picture and portrait is prohibited in Islam. However, if all the variants are collected and analyzed, it becomes evident that the prohibition is regarding only those pictures which have been made for worshipping. Many similar examples can be cited from the corpus of the Ḥadīth. Thus it is essential that if one is not satisfied from the apparent words of a Ḥadīth, one must gather and collate all its variants to form an opinion.

Reason and Revelation

It must be appreciated that reason and revelation never contradict. Earlier on, while explaining the principles of acceptance or rejection of a Ḥadīth, it has been explained that religion is based on universally established facts derived from knowledge and reason, and if a Ḥadīth appears to be contradicting these established facts, then it must be deliberated upon repeatedly. However, summarily rejecting a Ḥadīth, if it appears to be against these facts is not the correct academic approach. Similarly, ignoring these facts and accepting an insubstantial interpretation of the Ḥadīth should also not be the case. Experience shows that when a narrative is analyzed in the correct perspective, then many a time no contradiction remains with these facts and what is stated in the Ḥadīth becomes very clear. This of course can only be achieved when it is fully accepted that there can be no contradiction between reason and revelation. The works of scholars who have kept this principle in consideration speak volumes of how aptly they have been able to interpret a Ḥadīth. Thus one must always take into account this all important principle in interpreting the Ḥadīth.

(Translated from Ghāmidī's *Mizān* by Shehzad Saleem)

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