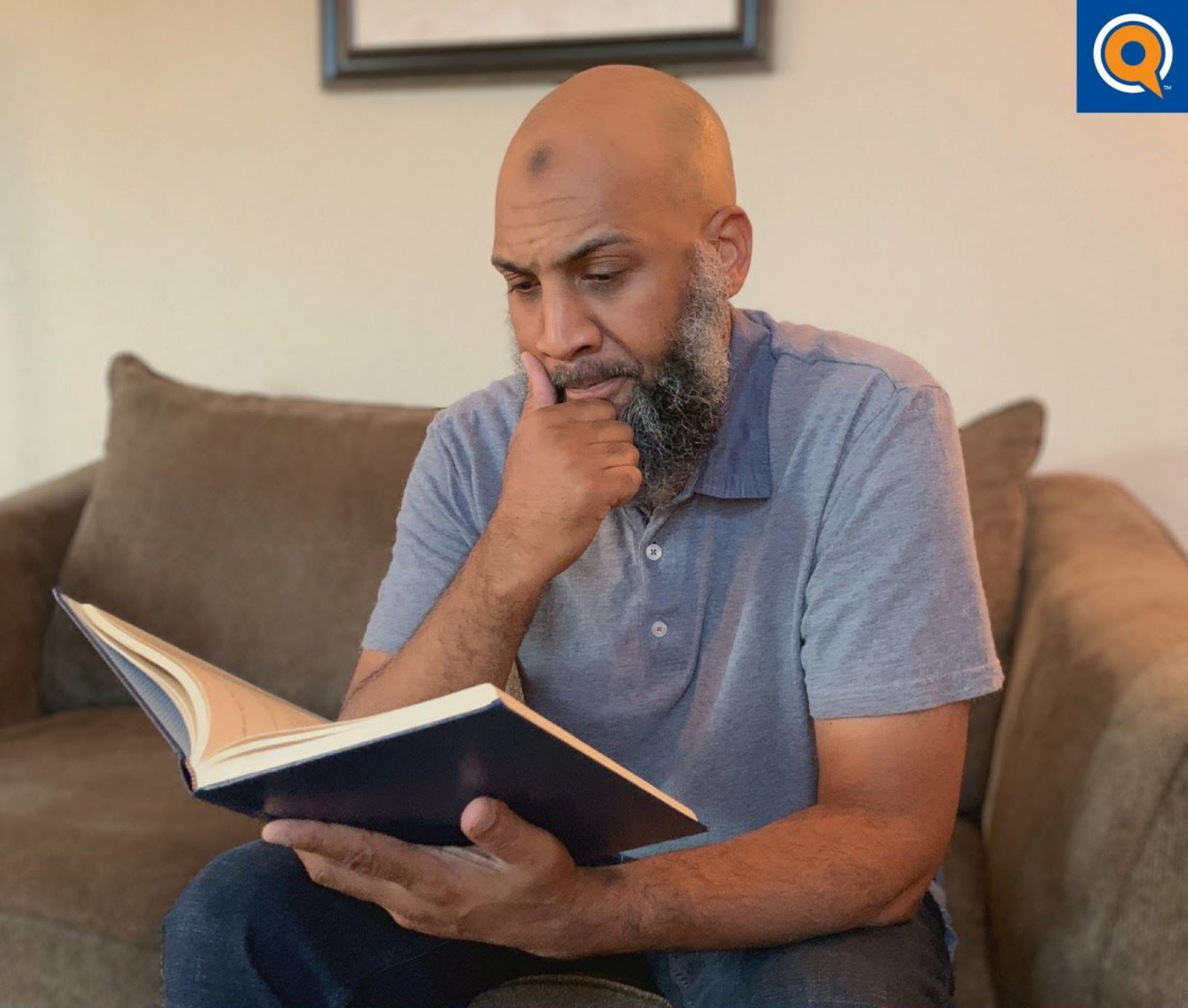




Give it a Second Thought: Dealing with Apparently Problematic Hadiths

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Abstract

The surge of criticism in recent times of supposedly problematic ḥadīths generally rests on the claim that such ḥadīths are absurd, unscientific, impossible, or contradictory. Every ḥadīth whose content is seen as problematic has a specific explanation, for which relevant literature can be consulted. This article highlights broad guidelines that are to be kept in mind when dealing with narrations of this nature. After some preliminary thoughts, four points are proffered for consideration: (1) the limits of human reason and experience; (2) the importance of contextualization; (3) the usage of figurative speech; and (4) the need to distinguish between impossibility and unlikelihood. In no way are these guidelines meant to be exhaustive. As a first response, they can help to assuage the concerns of a Muslim whose conscience is constantly agitated by reading apparently problematic ḥadīths. Detailed discussions of specific ḥadīths can be offered on a case-by-case basis.

Introduction

In numerous places in the Qur’ān, Allah calls upon humankind to use their intellect and to contemplate the perfection of His creation. He says, “And now We have sent down to you [people] a Scripture to remind you. Will you not use your reason?”¹ In other verses, He reprimands those who do not use their intellect: “But the disbelievers invent lies about Allah. Most of them do not use reason”² is a striking case in point.³ That the Qur’ān transcends a mere exposition of raw assertion by engaging in a process of argumentation and dialogue—it is the “evincive proof” (*burhān*) and “conclusive argument” (*al-ḥujjah al-bālighah*)—is indicative of its appeal to the human mind.⁴ Therefore, there exists no incongruity between reason and revelation; the former in fact leads one to appreciate the latter

¹ Qur’an 21:10.

² Qur’an 5:103.

³ “[T]he Qur’anic mode of thinking is not empirical or rationalist, historical or systematic, apodictic or pedagogical, analytical or descriptive. It is none of them and yet all of them at once. It combines conceptual analysis with moral judgment, empirical observation with spiritual guidance, historical narrative with eschatological expectation, and abstraction with imperative command.” See Ibrahim Kalin, *Reason and Rationality in the Qur’ān*, p. 9.

⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī writes, “There is no demonstration, argumentation, disjunction, or admonition built upon the general categories of knowledge afforded by reason and revelation that the Book of Allah has failed to articulate; it has mentioned them, however, according to the customary [speech habits] of the Arabs and not in accordance with the intricate methods of the theologians.” See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, vol. 4, p. 60.

while the latter enjoins and exemplifies the former.⁵ There are, however, two important caveats that should not escape our attention: the reasoning has to be sound and the revelation authentic.⁶

From the formative period of Islamic history, scholars wrote books to address apparently contradictory ḥadīths, a field known as *mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*,⁷ and ḥadīths that apparently conflict with other evidence or external reality, a field known as *mushkil al-ḥadīth*.⁸ In this vein, Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204 AH) authored *Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth*,⁹ regarded as one of the earliest works on the subject. Analogous works include Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī’s (d. 276 AH) pioneering monograph, *Ta’wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭahāwī’s (d. 321 AH) peerless compendium, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*,¹⁰ and Abū Bakr Ibn Fūrak’s (d. 406 AH) masterpiece, *Mushkil al-Ḥadīth wa Bayānuhū*. Scholars also dealt with such narrations in their general Ḥadīth commentaries when the occasion arose. Abū Bakr Ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311 AH) confidently proclaimed, “I am unaware of any two authentic narrations of the Prophet ﷺ that are contradictory. If anyone comes across such narrations, let him bring them to me so that I can reconcile them.”¹¹

Preliminary thoughts

It goes without saying that, before venturing to clarify any misunderstanding or problematic content in a ḥadīth, it is paramount to ensure its authenticity. A person should not expend energy in trying to reconcile, say, a fabricated ḥadīth with external realities, because it cannot be reliably attributed to the Prophet ﷺ to begin with, and therefore, should not be a matter of concern.¹² It is pointless to

⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Qānūn al-Ta’wīl*, p. 9.

⁶ Fūdāh, *al-Sharḥ al-Kabīr*, vol. 1, pp. 38-40.

⁷ When vocalized as *mukhtalif* (active participle) it refers to ḥadīths that ostensibly conflict with one another; when vocalized as *mukhtalaf* (verbal noun) it refers to the difference between the apparently contradictory ḥadīths. See Khayyāt, *Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth bayn al-Muḥaddithīn wa al-Uṣūliyyīn wa al-Fuqahā’*, pp. 25-26.

⁸ Abū Shabbah, *al-Wasīṭ fi ‘Ulūm wa Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth*, pp. 442-43.

⁹ On whether *Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth* is an independent work or part of *al-Umm*, see al-Sūsah, *Manhaj al-Tawfīq wa al-Tarjīḥ*, pp. 32-34.

¹⁰ The accurate title of this book is “*Bayān Mushkil Aḥādīth Rasūl Allāh (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) wa Istikhrāj mā fīhā min al-Aḥkām wa Naḥy al-Taḍād ‘anhā*.” See al-‘Awnī, *al-Unwān al-Ṣaḥīḥ li al-Kitāb*, pp. 64-65.

¹¹ Al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāyah*, pp. 432-33; cf. al-Haytamī, *Ilṣāq ‘Uwār al-Hawas*, pp. 223-26.

¹² It is not uncommon to find commentaries (e.g. al-Munāwī’s *Fayḍ al-Qadīr*) expounding on the meanings of ḥadīths that are arguably unreliable. One reason for this is that the commentator did not believe the given ḥadīth to be unreliable or he commented with the hope that, if an authentic route of transmission were located later, his

attempt to explain the putative ḥadīth, for instance, that states, “Hornets were created from the heads of horses and bees from the heads of cows” because this supposed ḥadīth is fabricated.¹³ Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī reminds the reader of the ancient adage: first stabilize the throne firmly, then worry about engraving it (*thabbit al-‘arsh thumm unqush*); that is, before concerning ourselves with whether the meaning is correct, we should ensure that the report is even reliable to begin with.¹⁴ In his magnum opus, al-Ṭaḥāwī’s *modus operandi* was to examine only acceptable narrations.¹⁵

A ḥadīth is often transmitted via multiple routes (*riwāyāt*), which may differ in wording. When attempting to understand a ḥadīth, the need to examine it in view of all its routes of transmission cannot be stressed enough. Until all the routes of a ḥadīth are collected and analyzed as a whole, Ibn al-Madīnī explains, its errors will not become apparent.¹⁶ Take the Prophetic ḥadīth narrated via ‘Ā’ishah and Buraydah that a human body has 360 joints and a person is required to perform a virtuous deed for each joint.¹⁷ In two variant routes of transmission from Abū Hurayrah and Ibn ‘Abbās, this ḥadīth is narrated with the words “360 bones,” which is incongruent with modern knowledge of human anatomy.¹⁸ But these routes are defective. The route of Ibn ‘Abbās contains the impugned narrator al-Layth ibn Abī Sulaym while the route of Abū Hurayrah suffers from several flaws, viz. disagreement among, and contentions regarding, the sub-transmitters, isolation in transmission, and conflict with more authentic routes. Although there

commentary might be of help. See, for instance, al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ Ma‘ānī al-Āthār*, vol. 4, p. 331. Beyond this, explanations of such ḥadīths can also be useful since they indirectly provide commentary for material that, at times, is also found in reliable ḥadīths for which commentary is not easily accessible.

¹³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, vol. 1, p. 189.

¹⁴ Al-Qārī, *al-Asrār al-Marfū‘ah*, p. 217.

¹⁵ Al-Ṭaḥāwī sets out to explain the apparent problems and disharmony between reports “transmitted from the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) via acceptable chains of transmissions related by those of circumspection, honesty, and suitable delivery.” See al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, vol. 1, p. 6.

¹⁶ Al-Khaṭīb, *al-Jāmi‘ li Akhlāq al-Rāwī wa Ādāb al-Sāmi‘*, vol. 2, p. 212.

¹⁷ The route of ‘Ā’ishah is cited in Muslim, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 1007, and the route of Buraydah in Aḥmad, *al-Musnad*, no. 22998, among others.

¹⁸ The route of Ibn ‘Abbās is cited in al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 422 and al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr*, vol. 11, p. 55. The route of Abū Hurayrah is cited in al-Bazzār, *al-Musnad*, no. 9200; Ibn Mandah, *al-Tawḥīd*, no. 92; al-Aṣṣafhānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, vol. 8, p. 307; and al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-Īmān*, vol. 13, p. 482.

are multiple routes for the ḥadīth, the correct version contains the words “360 joints.”¹⁹

The main focus here is on how to deal with problematic ḥadīths (*mushkil al-ḥadīth*). Before proceeding, however, a word on conflicting ḥadīths (*mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*) is in order. Jurists laid out the following procedure for dealing with conflicting ḥadīths.²⁰ The first step is to harmonize (*jam*) between the conflicting reports.²¹ The Prophet ﷺ prohibited a person from placing one leg on the other when lying down,²² but he reportedly did exactly that on one occasion.²³ Al-Khaṭṭābī explains that the prohibition pertains to the scenario where placing one leg on the other will expose one’s private part; the Prophet ﷺ did so in a manner that ensured his lower body was concealed.²⁴ When harmonization is not possible, one is to seek out evidence of abrogation (*naskh*).²⁵ As we have seen earlier, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have both allowed and prohibited the writing of his ḥadīths.²⁶ To avoid any issues in preserving the Qur’ān, the Prophet ﷺ initially prohibited the Companions from writing ḥadīths. Once there remained no fear of such neglect, he allowed them to write material besides the Qur’ān.²⁷ In the absence of evidence to suggest abrogation, one should prefer (*tarjīḥ*) one ḥadīth over the other based on a list of factors related to the chain of transmission, the text, and other issues.²⁸

¹⁹ See Jamīl Abū Sārah, *Athar al-‘Ilm al-Tajribī fī Kashf Naqd al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawī*, pp. 212-19.

²⁰ There is disagreement among jurists on the sequence of these steps. Although the majority of scholars arrange the steps as outlined here, the sound view in the Ḥanafī school of law is that a person will first seek out abrogation, then preference, then harmonization. See al-Turkumānī, *Dirāsāt*, pp. 499-502.

²¹ Ibn Rajab, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 5, pp. 155-56; Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Ihkām*, vol. 2, p. 21; al-Taḥāwī, *Sharḥ Ma ‘ānī al-Āthār*, vol. 4, p. 274. Related to this is Ibn al-Qayyim’s priceless observation that every time a ḥadīth is reported with multiple, conflicting permutations, it constitutes poor methodology to dismiss them as multiple occurrences, instead of attributing a flaw to one of the transmitters. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma ‘ād*, vol. 2, p. 273. For an extensive study on employing ‘multiple occurrences’ as an interpretive tool for conflicting ḥadīths, see Dr. Ḥamzah al-Bakrī’s *Ta ‘addud al-Ḥādīthah fī Riwayāt al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawī*.

²² Muslim, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 2099.

²³ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi ‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 475; Muslim, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 2100.

²⁴ Al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma ‘ālim al-Sunan*, vol. 4, p. 120; cf. al-Taḥāwī, *Sharḥ Ma ‘ānī al-Āthār*, vol. 4, p. 280.

²⁵ Indications that one ḥadīth is abrogated can take several forms: an explicit directive from the Prophet ﷺ, a statement from a Companion on the Prophet’s final practice, dating the ḥadīths to determine the latter of the two, and the consensus of the community upon one of the ḥadīths. See al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj*, vol. 1, p. 35.

²⁶ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi ‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 112; Muslim, *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 3004.

²⁷ Ibn Qutaybah, *Ta ‘wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, p. 412; al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma ‘ālim al-Sunan*, vol. 4, p. 184.

²⁸ Al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj*, vol. 1, p. 35. On these factors, see al-Ḥasanī, *Ma ‘rifat Madār al-Isnād*, p. 87 ff.; al-Turkumānī, *Dirāsāt*, pp. 509-531.

Guidelines

Muslims believe that the Prophet ﷺ received information about the unseen; how then can they reject something *authentically* attributed to him only because it seems far-fetched in light of the conventional understandings of the world? If a ḥadīth describes how the Devil flees flatulating upon hearing the call to prayer,²⁹ how can anyone who accepts that the Prophet ﷺ receives information about the unseen reject it under the pretext that it is absurd when it is describing something beyond the scope of his intellect and/or experience?

To understand this point better, note that there are three primary sources from which people acquire knowledge: sound senses, reason, and truthful reports.³⁰ The first source includes the five senses, i.e. hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. We use these senses to perceive the world around us, knowing that each sense is limited. The second source is human reason.³¹ We come to know the texture of silk with our sense of touch and the smell of musk with our sense of smell, but neither of these senses can help us to determine how they were prepared and what purpose they serve, simply because this is conceptual and propositional knowledge that lies beyond the senses and can only be comprehended by the intellect. This is where reason comes in and guides us; but reason also has its limits.³² The third source of knowledge is accurate information provided through truthful reporting, such as historical anecdotes or testimony. The most important form of such transmitted information for a believer is divine revelation, the scope of which extends beyond both human reason and experience. It would be *unreasonable* to reject information

²⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 608; cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 2, p. 85.

³⁰ Al-Nasafī, *al-‘Aqīdah al-Nasafīyyah*, p. 2.

³¹ “Reason, both theoretical and practical, is our accumulated and critically organized common sense and contains a normative kernel of widely accepted values and ultimate ideals.” See Shabbir Akhtar, *The Qur’ān and the Secular Mind*, p. 58. One has to be cautious not to confuse certain constructions of reason, such as the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, as synonymous with ‘human reason’ per se. See Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, p. 19 ff.; idem, *Islam & the Problem of Black Suffering*, pp. 38-40. In the present day, many charges of Islam as being irrational stem from the fact that rationality “as developed in the Islamic intellectual tradition contravenes the main thrust of modern and postmodern notions of rationality that have arisen in the West since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” See Kalin, *Reason and Rationality in the Qur’ān*, p. 2.

³² In *The Outer Limits of Reason*, Noson Yanofsky provides fascinating and engaging examples of the limits of reason and its related areas: science, technology, logic, and mathematics. See, for instance, the chessboard and dominoes example, the ship of Theseus, Russell’s paradox, and the problem of induction on pp. 2, 31, 85, 236, and 340-45, respectively.

derived from divine revelation merely because it seems *prima facie* absurd. To say revelation transcends human reason is not to say it is irrational—it is, rather, supra-rational, in the sense that it transcends the (necessarily limited) cognitive competencies of human reason.³³ In other words, it is incorrect to weigh revelation solely on a scale as limited as human reason and experience.³⁴ One who attempts to do so, Ibn Khaldūn observes, is like a person who wishes to weigh mountains on a goldsmith's weighing scale.³⁵

Reports authentically related from the Prophet ﷺ are best understood in their context. Failing to contextualize will lead a person to criticize a ḥadīth anachronistically. It would be unfair for a critic to object to a particular practice or statement of the Prophet ﷺ only because it is considered unacceptable in the critic's current social milieu. Modern critics are often guilty of imposing certain ideals onto their reading of history; they believe that what does not correspond to these ideals is to be unquestionably abandoned because it is “backward” or “irrational.” It is, therefore, disingenuous to criticize the marriage of our mother ‘Ā’ishah at a young age based on modern marital ethics. Despite the lengths the Prophet's most ardent contemporary critics went to criticize him, his marriage to ‘Ā’ishah was never considered problematic for them since marriage at a young age was socially acceptable at that time. It is only recently that this has become an issue. The first to formally appraise this aspect of the Prophet's life negatively was the Orientalist David Margoliouth (d. 1940) in the early 1900s.³⁶

³³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, vol. 5, pp. 297-8; Kalin, *Reason and Rationality in the Qur’ān*, p. 7.

³⁴ See Shabbīr al-‘Uthmānī, *al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, pp. 87-95. Mawlānā Shabbīr al-‘Uthmānī asks rhetorically: have we applied, say, our sense of touch to the point that we have touched everything that can be felt or our sense of hearing to the point that we have heard all there is to hear? When we accept that we have not—and could not have—utilized these senses to their full capacity, how can we then expect to achieve a complete grasp of our rational faculties? See *ibid.*, p. 33. Allah informs mankind about the limits of their knowledge, “You may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: Allah knows and you do not” (Qur’an 2:216) and “You have only been given a little knowledge” (Qur’an 17:85).

³⁵ Ibn Khaldūn writes, “The intellect, indeed, is a correct scale. Its indications are completely certain and in no way wrong. However, the intellect should not be used to weigh such matters as the oneness of God, the other world, the truth of prophecy, the real character of the divine attributes, or anything else that lies beyond the level of the intellect. That would mean to desire the impossible. One might compare it with a man who sees a scale in which gold is being weighed, and wants to weigh mountains in it.” Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. 3, p. 38.

³⁶ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 144; *idem*, *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 76.

This is not to deny the universality of the Prophet's example for humankind throughout time. The Prophet ﷺ was undoubtedly sent "to bring good news and warning to all people."³⁷ Legal theorists have formulated the maxim "*al-ʿibrah bi ʿumūm al-lafẓ lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab* (consideration is given to the generality of the wording and not to the specific cause)" when studying divine scripture. However, Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd (d. 702 AH) qualifies this maxim by cautioning students to be aware of the difference between "the indication of context and signs (*qarāʾin*) towards specifying the generality" and "the occurrence of a general rule in a specific scenario" because the mere occurrence of a generality in a scenario does not specify it.³⁸ In other words, this maxim is not to be taken as a universal rule. He further explains, "Context provides clarity on what is ambiguous, specifies what is ambivalent, and frames statements according to their intended purpose."³⁹ In any case, studying the context of a ḥadīth to better understand its rationale and application is a far cry from dismissing ḥadīths arbitrarily because they are seen as outdated.⁴⁰

At times a figurative reading of a ḥadīth can easily remove the difficulty in understanding its contents. To interpret the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ without considering the tools of rhetoric can be misleading, especially when the use of figurative speech (*majāz*) is common in Arabic, as in other languages.⁴¹ This equally applies to verses of the Qurʾān where a literal reading would convey an

³⁷ Qurʾan 34:28.

³⁸ Al-Subkī, *al-Ashbāh wa al-Nazāʾir*, vol. 2, p. 135. For other qualifications to this maxim, see *ibid.*, pp. 136-37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ There is obvious nuance in categorizing the practices (*ṣunan*) of the Prophet ﷺ vis-à-vis their value as legal rulings. Dr. Sulaymān al-Ashqar divides the actions (*afʿāl*) of the Prophet ﷺ into ten categories. Among them, actions that were *jibillī* (innate) [e.g., ordinary activities like walking and sleeping], *ʿādī* (customary) [e.g., lengthening the hair and wearing certain attire], *dunyawī* (mundane) [e.g., political strategies] do not allow for more than general permissibility unless external evidence suggests otherwise. See al-Ashqar, *Afʿāl al-Rasūl wa Dalālatuhā al-Sharʿiyyah*, pp. 215-48. That being said, Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Ghumārī explains that legal theorists have stated that a person will be rewarded for following the customary practices of the Prophet (e.g., wearing certain types of clothing or eating certain types of food) out of love and emulation of the Prophet ﷺ. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar is on record for his scrupulous emulation of the Prophet ﷺ even in these matters. See al-Ghumārī, *al-Nafḥah al-Ilāhiyyah*, p. 157. According to Abū Shāmah al-Maqdisī (d. 665 AH) and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771 AH)—and Ḥadīth scholars in general, as related by al-Ghazālī—emulation in these practices are desirable, albeit the lowest form of desirability (*istiḥbāb*). See Abū Shāmah, *al-Muḥaqqaq min ʿIlm al-Uṣūl*, pp. 270-71; ʿAwwāmah, *Ḥujjiyyat Afʿāl al-Rasūl*, pp. 56-60.

⁴¹ On the use of a figurative reading of ḥadīths as a tool to explain away problematic content, see Jamīl, *Athar al-ʿIlm al-Tajrībī*, pp. 146-50.

incorrect meaning.⁴² Take the example of the ḥadīth, “Two months of ‘Īd never fall short: Ramadan and Dhū al-Ḥijjah,” which apparently means that these two months will never fall short of thirty days. Taken at face value, this contradicts reality. However, it is interpreted figuratively to mean that these two months will never fall short of spiritual value even though their days may be twenty-nine, which is a completely plausible explanation.⁴³

Losing sight of the broader message of a ḥadīth by delving into its literal words can deter one from understanding its intent. When taken at face value, the ḥadīth in which the Prophet ﷺ tells Abū Dharr “during sunset, the sun prostrates underneath the ‘*Arsh* (Divine Throne) and then seeks permission to rise again” is difficult to reconcile with science. However, there is a greater message embedded in these words. The Prophet ﷺ took this opportunity—when the world goes through a magnificent transformation, that of the alternation of night and day—to teach mankind that this marvelous phenomenon happens only with the permission of Allah. The ‘*Arsh* encompasses the entire creation, and therefore, the sun is always beneath the ‘*Arsh*.⁴⁴ This moving with Allah’s permission and by His command is described as its “prostration,” the prostration of each creation manifests according to its individual state of being, as stated in the Qur’ān.⁴⁵

The Prophet ﷺ articulated his comment according to what Abū Dharr observed in front of him. Expressing a specific orbital path or other material reality was not the purpose of the ḥadīth; misconstruing it as such would only serve to obscure the intended message.⁴⁶ It is inaccurate to study ḥadīths of this nature through a strictly materialistic and naturalistic lens because the Prophet’s mission was not to provide guidance on scientific matters.⁴⁷ Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1762 CE) makes the apt observation that the prophets would not occupy themselves with matters not relevant to “the refinement of the soul and governing of the community unless it was incidental.”⁴⁸ Even in daily conversations today, people use phrases that are

⁴² See, for instance, Qur’an 9:67; cf. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*, vol. 4, p. 174.

⁴³ Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Sunan*, no. 692.

⁴⁴ For a summary of the interpretations of the word ‘*Arsh*, see al-Muṭī‘ī, *Tawfīq al-Raḥmān*, pp. 361-63.

⁴⁵ See Qur’an 17:45.

⁴⁶ See al-Bukharī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 3199; Shafī‘, *Ma‘ārif al-Qur’ān*, vol. 7, pp. 389-82.

⁴⁷ Al-Bannūrī, *Ma‘ārif al-Sunan*, vol. 5, p. 349.

⁴⁸ Al-Dihlawī, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah*, vol. 1, p. 158.

unscientific if taken literally; e.g., at sunrise or sunset. A study of the Prophet's ḥadīths demonstrates that they possessed a rhetorical consistency that can be dubbed a Prophetic style of speaking.⁴⁹ Scholars were well aware of this phenomenon. While grading a particular ḥadīth, Ibn 'Adī (d. 365 AH) states, "It does not resemble the words of the Prophet"⁵⁰ and elsewhere al-Mundhirī (d. 656 AH) states, "But this ḥadīth gleams with a shine from the light of prophethood."⁵¹ One characteristic of the Prophetic style was hyperbole.⁵² Hence, early Muslim scholars have not interpreted ḥadīths that state "he is not from among us" as excommunication from the faith.⁵³ To fully grasp the message of certain ḥadīths, therefore, one is required to be conversant with the language of Ḥadīth.

Finally, it is essential to make a distinction between what is fundamentally impossible (*mustaḥīl*) and what is merely unlikely (*mustaḥrab*) though within the realm of what is possible. Impossibility is a quality intrinsic to a thing itself. Something impossible can never be; a circle can never take the shape of a square. On the other hand, deeming something unlikely is a relative and subjective matter as it derives from the limitations of human reason and experience, either individual or collective.⁵⁴ Not so long ago, it was considered unlikely for someone to travel from one country to another in a short span of time, and even impossible for anyone to reach the moon. But due to technological advancements, such feats are now easily achievable. In a similar manner, if an authentic ḥadīth describes

⁴⁹ In a fascinating study, Halim Sayoud conducted an author discrimination analysis—where two texts are studied to determine whether they were composed by the same author—comparing the Qur'ān and the ḥadīths recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. By conducting three series of experiments (global form, segmental form, and an automatic author attribution), Sayoud concluded, "First, the two investigated books should have different authors; second, all the segments that are extracted from a unique book appear to have a certain stylistic similarity." See Halim Sayoud, Author Discrimination Between the Holy Qur'ān and the Prophet's Statements, *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vol. 27 (2012), no. 4, 2012, pp. 427-44. The second conclusion of this study demonstrates that despite the frequent usage of paraphrasing when transmitting the Prophet's words (*al-riwāyah bi al-mā'nā*), the ḥadīths maintained an overall degree of stylistic consistency. See Brown, *Hadith*, 2nd ed., p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ibn 'Adī, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 2, p. 403.

⁵¹ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Targhīb wa al-Tarhīb*, vol. 4, p. 75, no. 4855.

⁵² Brown, *Hadith*, 2nd ed., p. 12.

⁵³ Under the ḥadīth "Whoever deceives us is not from among us," al-Khaṭṭābī writes, "That is, he is not upon our path. He intends thereby that the person who deceives his brother and does not take his best interest to mind has failed to follow me and hold onto my lifestyle. Some have understood this as an exclusion of the person from Islam, but this interpretation is not sound." See al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma'ālim al-Sunan*, vol. 3, p. 118.

⁵⁴ Al-Sibā'ī, *al-Sunnah wa Makānatuhā fī al-Tashrī' al-Islāmī*, pp. 51-52; cf. Mullā Khāṭir, *al-Iṣṣābah fī Ṣiḥḥat Ḥadīth al-Dhubābah*, p. 101; 'Abd Allah al-Ghumārī, *al-Qawl al-Jazl fī mā lā Yu'dhar fīhi bi al-Jahl*, p. 11.

something that appears difficult to believe, such as the splitting of the moon,⁵⁵ it is incorrect to discard it as an impossibility. Failure to appreciate its meaning can stem from a myriad of factors. Khalīl Mullā Khāṭir aptly points out, “It seems that skeptics of Ḥadīth have confused what is *impossible* with what is *unacceptable* to the Western worldview.”⁵⁶



That many of the same ḥadīths modern critics regard as problematic were already discussed in detail by the greatest Islamic minds is often overlooked in these discussions. The difference between classical Muslim scholars and modern critics is the perspective from which the two groups look at the objection. Traditional scholars were not oblivious to scientific realities nor blind to logical fallacies; many, in fact, were actively involved in the rational and scientific fields.⁵⁷ However, they had a more robust conception of revelation as a purveyor of actual knowledge and truth about the world, while modern detractors usually presume a more empiricist and rationalist epistemology which tends to reduce the role of revelation in providing knowledge, as well as being overly quick to subordinate the interpretation of revelation to the independent conclusions of reason and science. When presented with ḥadīths that, at first blush, seem problematic, the reader is advised to bear in mind the guidelines outlined above and not dismiss those ḥadīths summarily without a second thought.

⁵⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 3636, 3868; cf. Jamīl, *Athar al-‘Ilm al-Tajribī*, pp. 84-88.

⁵⁶ Mullā Khāṭir, *al-Iṣābah fī Ṣiḥḥat Ḥadīth al-Dhubābah*, p. 102; cf. Brown, *The Rules of Matn Criticism*, pp. 393-94.

⁵⁷ The Muslim scientist and physician Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 687 AH) is one example. Not only was he a skilled physician and scientist, second only to Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), he also wrote a book on Ḥadīth nomenclature. See al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyyah al-Kubrā*, vol. 8, p. 305; Meyerhof, M. and Schacht, J., “Ibn al-Nafīs,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition.