The Use of Historical Information in Conducting Content Criticism on Hadith

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THE USE OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION IN CONDUCTING CONTENT CRITICISM IN ḤADĪTH

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Abstract: Rejecting hadīth based on it contradicting known historical events has been deemed an accepted principle of content (matn) criticism among classical hadīth scholars. How exactly this rule is meant to be applied is the question this paper attempts to address by looking at how Abu Ja’far al-Ṭahāwī applied it throughout his magnum opus – Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār. Of the 14 examples selected from the 15-volume work, it can be seen that Ṭahāwī often uses this principle to reject what would normally be deemed very authentic hadīth. However, when the hadīth is ‘raised’ – that is, it is a prophetic hadīth (marfū’ī) – we find Ṭahāwī exercises flexible hermeneutical skills and defends the hadīth.

Keywords: ḥadīth, matn, history, Prophet Muhammad

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship in content criticism in hadīth studies has grown and evidence is mounting that content (matn) criticism of all sorts existed as early as the second and third centuries after Hijra1 (approximately 700-800 CE).2 These findings come against the backdrop that early Muslim hadīth scholarship only focussed on sanad (chains of narrators) criticism. If an inquisitive student of hadīth studies was to ask about the rules of these content criticisms, modern scholarship would be hesitant from giving a definitive answer. This chapter aims to answer this question broadly and in relation to clashes of the content of hadīth with historical information. How was a hadīth scholar meant to have dealt with a hadīth that contained contradictory information to historical events? As part of a broader study,3 this article analyses the works of Abu Ja’far Ṭahāwī (d. 933) in his magnum opus, Sharh mushkil al-āthār. A flag bearer of orthodox Islam, Ṭahāwī’s dealings with hadīth will surprise the modernist critic of the hadīth corpus as well as traditionalist conservative Muslims.

Before Ṭahāwī, al-Shāfī‘ī (d. 820) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) wrote in the area of ‘problems’ in hadīth. However, while these authors wrote in a reactionary to a way to a particular group,

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1 The journey of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.
3 This article is a chapter from a dissertation thesis dealing with how Ṭahāwī conducts different types of content criticism throughout his major works.
Ṭaḥāwī’s *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* is not only more encyclopaedic and vast but is an example of a ḥadīth scholar applying hermeneutical methodology and establishing the process along the way rather than disproving a deviant group.⁴ Hence, studying Ṭaḥāwī is very suitable in seeing how historical information is used in content criticism.

The concept of prophetic traditions not contradicting historical events nor the unfolding of events since the Prophet’s time contradicting his words was a core belief that was known by the first generation of Muslims, the Companions. We also see in the generations after the Companions and first Muslims that certain aḥadīth were deemed weak due to historical anachronism. An example of this is when the famous ḥadīth narrator Shaʿbī (d. 721) says it was impossible for two verses of the Qurʾān speaking of a learned man from the Children of Israel having converted to Islam being ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām (d. 663), a famous Jewish convert Companion. Shaʿbī says this is not possible as the surahs (chapters) of the Qurʾān that contain these verses were revealed in Mecca while ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām only converted after Prophet Muhammad’s migration to Medina. We will come to how Ṭaḥāwī deals with this case later, but the point being highlighted is that the belief a ḥadīth could not contradict what we know is certain from history existed from the generation of the Companions of the Prophet. Because of this, we are not surprised to see this principle being mentioned in books that deal with the sciences of ḥadīth.⁵

**HISTORY USED TO REJECT ḤADĪTH**

It is no surprise that we see Ṭaḥāwī, arriving a few generations later, deeming some aḥadīth (even though they appear in some of the most authentic ḥadīth literature) as unreliable due to this specific rule. Traditional Muslim readers will be surprised that aḥadīth appearing in Bukhari and Muslim (two ḥadīth books often deemed as the most authentic in terms of sanad criteria) were totally rejected by Ṭaḥāwī due to historical flaws in the matn.⁶ For example, the ḥadīth where it is narrated that the Companion Jarīr converted to Islam 40 days before the death of the Prophet of Islam has been deemed authentic by many ḥadīth scholars.⁷ The editor of *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, Shuʿayb al-Arnāʾū (d. 2016), highlights the late ultra-strict ḥadīth scholar Albany deemed this ḥadīth as authentic (ṣaḥīḥ) due to his exclusive attention to the chains of transmission (and not the content of the ḥadīth). Ṭaḥāwī, on the other hand, lists evidence of Jarīr being present at the pilgrimage of the Prophet, being sent to Yemen by the Prophet and other evidences to prove he could not have converted to

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⁴ For a comparison between these three texts, see Aisha Musa, *Hadith as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 69-71.

⁵ See Miṣḥāb Allāh ʿAbd al-Bāqī, *Al-Imām Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī wa-atharuhu fi naqd al-ḥadīth* [Imam Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī: His Impact in the Field of Hadith Criticism] (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2010). ʿAbd al-Bāqī mentions Ṭaḥāwī used this principle and gives a single example; however, does not delve into Ṭaḥāwī’s criteria when using this principle.

⁶ This will be shown in the upcoming example of Sufyān ibn ῦUaynah’s version of ḥadīth being deemed as improbable.

⁷ Abū Jaʿfar Ahmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* [Explanation of the Difficulties found in Hadith Narrations], ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnāʾū (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 2010), vol. 6, 299.
Islam only 40 days before the Prophet’s death. Interestingly, centuries later, the famous hadith scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449) deems this hadith as weak for the exact same reason as Ṭahāwī, most likely benefitting from Ṭahāwī’s arguments.

Even more shocking to modern sceptics of early matn criticism as well as ultra conservative Muslims is the example of Ṭahāwī taking issue with the wording of a hadith narrated by Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah (d. 814) that appears in Bukhari and Muslim. Ibn ‘Uyaynah narrates the Prophet implied that he intended to exile the polytheists in totality from the Arabian Peninsula. Ṭahāwī brings many reasons when he deals with the wording of this hadith, among them highlighting that, at the time of the Prophet’s death, there had been no polytheists remaining in the Arabian Peninsula. Ṭahāwī claims he believes the incorrect wording was due to Ibn ‘Uyaynah relying too much on his memory for his narrations instead of writing them down. Instead, Ṭahāwī argues the real wording may have been ‘Jews and Christians’ of the region in place of the word ‘polytheists.’ This hadith is interesting in the context of Ṭahāwī rejecting not any hadith, but prophetic hadith, due to historical anachronism. This comes with certain conditions, which will be discussed later.

Another vivid example of Ṭahāwī using this tool is when commenting on the report that the second Caliph Umar led the funeral prayer of Umm Ḥabiba (d. 664), the wife of the Prophet. Ṭahāwī says, as he points to the flaw in this hadith, it was well known that Umm Ḥabiba lived for a long time (daḥr awm tawīl awm) after Umar. Ṭahāwī then brings other evidence to show other hadithic evidence shows the wife of the Prophet that died was Zaynab b. Jahš (d. 641).

One last example I would like to give is where Ṭahāwī cites historical anachronism to cast doubt on a hadith when a group of people describe they came to the Prophet (during the season of Hajj) while performing the tamattu’ type of hajj (a type of hajj that has an initial lesser pilgrimage ritual attached). Ṭahāwī objects to this statement and argues ‘our hearts sees this as a distant possibility as tamattu’ is a combination of the lesser pilgrimage umrah followed by hajj and the Arabs at the time (of the Prophet) did not see it permissible to

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8 Shu’ayb al-Amīn highlights the late Albany included this hadith in his sahih category due to him only occupying himself with sanad and totally neglecting the matn of the hadith.
9 Deeming a hadith weak is in essence rejecting hadithit. The choice of word ‘weak’ is often used as hadith scholars try not to use absolute terms unless they absolutely need to. I have tried to use this same approach.
10 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-‘āthār, vol. 6, 301.
11 Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah is one of the giants of early hadith transmitters. He is famously known for the large number of hadith he has narrated as well as his genius intelligence.
12 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-‘āthār, vol. 7, 191. Hadith narrated in Bukhari and Muslim also.
13 Although Ṭahāwī is a great defender of hadith literature and at times a defender of the ‘people of hadith,’ he often does not hold back from criticising some of the greatest figures from hadith literature such as Zuhrī, Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah and Shu’ba.
14 Ṭahāwī argues the term ‘mushrik’ (polytheist) should not be applied to Christians and Jews because of what he argues their elevated status holds.
15 While a hadith can be the word of a Companion, a prophetic hadith is something that is believed to have been uttered by the Prophet.
16 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-‘āthār, vol. 6, 331.
perform *umrah* during the months of hajj."¹⁷ Here, Ṭahāwī highlights how the historical anachronism lies in the attribution of the phrase *tamattu'* to that time period, whereas the term only became known as a category of hajj much later. Ṭahāwī finishes his argument by showing how other narrators of this hadīth from the famous narrator ‘Aṭā’ did not include this statement.

These few examples are found scattered throughout Ṭahāwī’s *Sharh Mushkil al-Āthār* and show practical applications of Ṭahāwī’s hermeneutics where he critically analyses the content of aḥadīth in relation to historical events. However, the reader may prematurely conclude from this that Ṭahāwī gives the green light for immediate rejection of hadīth regardless of its type and authenticity if it appears to conflict with historical evidence. To arrive at a more comprehensive conclusion of Ṭahāwī’s approach, one will have to see whether there are counter examples of the above and if so, look for the underlying reasons to see if Ṭahāwī is using a consistent methodology. Counter examples of where the first meaning from a hadīth contradicts historical events before the time of the Prophet or afterward will be presented and discussed in this article. Before embarking on this though, it is worth analysing the current examples just described to see if there are any common patterns.

One can definitely not conclude the above examples where Ṭahāwī easily disregards aḥadīth are mainly of the type where the hadīth is weak from a sanad perspective to begin with. This is a common phenomenon that Brown has shown in his hadīth analysis by delving into mawdū‘ī ath literature (forged aḥadīth).¹⁸ Brown argues that scholars like ibn al-Jawzī of the fifth century criticised the content of hadīth and deem them to be forgeries; however, these hadīth were already deemed weak from a sanad perspective in the third century.

Instead, what we find in the above five examples is that all (except one) are not prophetic hadīth. The hadīth are not claiming to transmit the words uttered by the Prophet of Islam, hence are not marfū‘.¹⁹ For example, the hadīth of Ja‘rīr converting to Islam is merely a historical event narrated from that period by the same narrators that narrate prophetic aḥadīth. The same is the case of Caliph Umar leading the funeral prayer for one of the wives of the Prophet years after the Prophet had died. The hadīth about a group of people performing the tamattu’ pilgrimage contains the words of the Prophet, but the statement Ṭahāwī objects to is not a statement of the Prophet (‘we came to the Prophet whilst performing the tamattu’ type of hajj”). The only example where it is directly a prophetic hadīth is the one narrated by ibn ‘Uyaynah where the Prophet expressed a wish to exile the polytheists. While analysing the different narrations, Ṭahāwī makes it clear that all the other narrations mention ‘Jews and Christians’ except for the narration of Ibn’Uyaynah. So, in this discussion, Ṭahāwī is using historical arguments to prove a specific version of the prophetic hadīth (one more widely narrated that mentions the Jews and Christians) over another narration (which mentions the

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¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 6, 225. Just like Ṭahāwī points out, the editor, Shu‘ayb al-Amā‘ūt, also deems this hadīth as weak from a sanad perspective.


polytheists). What Ṭahāwī is not doing is rejecting all the variants of the authentically reported statement of the Prophet of Islam due to that statement not matching historical events.

The difference between prophetic and non-prophetic ḥadīth is of paramount significance in Islamic law and ḥadīth sciences. Prophetic aḥadīth, particular when discussing issues pertaining to religion, are seen by Ṭahāwī as a source of revelation similar to the Qurʾān. The Islamic understanding of revelation is often divided into al-wahy al-matlū (revelation that can be recited in ritual prayers) and al-wahy ghayr al-matlū (revelation that cannot be recited in ritual prayers). This takes a central theme in Ṭahāwī’s approach to content criticism of ḥadīth in relation to prophetic aḥadīth. Ṭahāwī emphasises the distinction throughout the Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār to highlight that often the ishkāl (difficulty) found in different aḥadīth is due to the differences in the narrators (after the Prophet) and the apparent contradiction does not stem from the Prophet’s words. An example of this is when Ṭahāwī deals with apparently contradictory aḥadīth explaining the context of revelation for verse 24 of surah al-Fath.20

Ṭahāwī narrates two aḥadīth explaining the very different contexts of revelation for the verse. Before continuing and finding a means to prefer one narration over the other, Ṭahāwī clearly highlights that one ḥadīth is from Companion Anas bin Mālik, while the other is from Marwān ibn al-Ḥakm (d. 685; not a Companion) and Miswar (d. 684; a very young Companion). Ṭahāwī states: “it has become very clear that there is no single narration from these two narrations that are from the Prophet sws himself, and that the contradiction is in the words of those who were below the Prophet sws.”21 Ṭahāwī then analyses the ḥadīth and shows preference for Anas ibn Mālik’s narration, as will be discussed later. Contradictions not existing in prophetic ḥadīth is a central theme for Ṭahāwī and something that he outlines in the opening paragraphs of his 15-volume magnum corpus Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār.

One could even say the liberalism with which Ṭahāwī easily dismisses non-prophetic ḥadīth as not authentic is in complete contrast to the flexible hermeneutic interpretations he is willing to exercise in the following prophet ḥadīth examples.

**PROPHETIC ḤADĪTH ARE DEFENDED**

At times, authentic prophetic ḥadīth seem to contradict commonly known knowledge of history. A classic example is when the Prophet was asked by Companion Abu Dhar (d. 653) about which mosque was first placed on earth, then asked about which mosque was built after this mosque and finally the time difference between the two mosques. In this ḥadīth, which is very widely and authentically reported (found in Bukhari and Muslim), the Prophet is reported to have answered the two mosques were masjid al-harām (the Ka’ba in Mecca) and

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21 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, vol. 1, 53.
al-masjid al-aqṣā (temple/mosque in Jerusalem), between them was a period of 40 years and “wherever prayer catches you, pray there for that is a masjid (mosque).”

It is very famously known by the Abrahamic faith traditions that the builder of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was Prophet David with his son Solomon. It is also widely known the builder of the Ka’ba was Ibrahim (Abraham). Logic demands the difference in time between these two figures is much larger than 40 years. Here, one may expect Ṭahāwī to reject this hadīth due to its obvious clash with historical knowledge. Ṭahāwī instead, after affirming the names of the builders (Abraham and David), turns to the wording of the hadīth. The Arabic word that is used in this hadīth for ‘placing’ is waḍ. Using the slight flexibility given by the difference between a ‘placer’ and ‘builder’ that this word allows, Ṭahāwī states it is possible some other Prophet of God (other than David and Solomon) ‘placed’ the foundations of al-masjid al-aqṣā and it was years later when David (perhaps with the help of his son Solomon) ‘built’ the mosque. Ṭahāwī interestingly states following this that “there is not in this hadīth, all praise be to Allah, what would require its impossibility.”

Here, Ṭahāwī is not providing evidence of another prophet having built the Aqṣā mosque. He is just highlighting, since the word ‘placer’ leaves the possibility of someone other than the ‘builder,’ which Ṭahāwī implies should be taken up as any other interpretation would lead to contradiction. This sentence makes one wonder: What if the word ‘built’ was used instead? In this situation, Ṭahāwī implies a hadīth (even a prophetic hadīth) can be abandoned if it contains an “impossibility.”

Ṭahāwī consequentially outlines his approach towards prophetic hadīth in the face of such difficulties in general by stating:

in this way, is it incumbent upon interpreting the hadīth of the Prophet as Ṭalib said: ‘When you are narrated a hadīth from the Prophet, then think about the Prophet (and what he is reported to have said), what is most befitting, most pious and closest to guidance and god-fearfulness.”

Brown in his article refers to Ṭalib’s approach as “charitable,” one that encourages hermeneutical gymnastics to reconcile the hadīth with the Prophet’s reported words. Ṭahāwī does not indicate any reason as to why he differs between a placer and builder except his duty to remove conflict from this hadīth. For Ṭahāwī, the existence of the possibility of interpreting it in a way that removes contradiction is what is significant, not the evidence to prove whether the possibility occurred. This approach may be objected to as being methodologically weak by some. One could hypothesise from Ṭahāwī’s works that he would respond to this objection by stating that rejecting a hadīth that has been authentically narrated, while there is an interpretation that does not make it irreconcilable with historical

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23 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkīl al-‘āthār, vol. 1, 110.
24 Ibid.
knowledge, is an even weaker approach. The late Albanian editor of the manuscript of *Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾāthār* that is being used for this research, Shuʿayb Arnāʾūṭ, interestingly places in the footnote of this section a quote from Ibn Qayyim (d. 1350). Ibn Qayyim comments on this *ḥadīth* in his *Zād al-Mād* and points to some positive evidence that the one who laid the foundation of the mosque in Jerusalem was Jacob, son of Isaac, while the builder of the mosque was David. There is no evidence that shows Ṭaḥāwī was aware of this *ḥadīth* and one can conclude that Ṭaḥāwī entertains this possibility only to defend what he felt was a sound prophetic *ḥadīth*. Just like historical events before the life of the Prophet can be seen to contradict the apparent meanings of *ahadīth*, so can historical information relating to post-prophetic events.

An example of post-prophetic historical events clashing with *ḥadīth* is the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet where he was reported to have said, “when Chosroe perishes, there will be no Chosroe afterwards and when Caesar perishes, there will be no Caesar after.”26 The first half of this *ḥadīth* has been celebrated by Islamic scholars as a Prophetic miracle where he not only foretells the fall the Persian empire but miraculously prophesises it will not re-establish itself.27 The second half, however, has been somewhat problematic as the Caesar during the time of the Prophet died and was replaced by other Caesars. This problem was obviously noticed before the end of the third century when Ṭaḥāwī was most likely dictating his *Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾāthār*. In fact, Ṭaḥāwī quotes two opinions from scholars before him dealing with the *ishkāl* (problem), both of them bringing an interpretation for the *ḥadīth* (an interpretation that removes the ‘problem’).

Ṭaḥāwī first quotes the view of al-Shāfīʿi, who interprets Chosroe and Caesar in the *ḥadīth* as the lands of Iraq and Syria, respectively. This interpretation implies, once these provinces and the local ‘chosroe’ and ‘Caesar’ ruling over these provinces are gone, these lands will come under the rule of Islam. Al-Shāfīʿi brings evidence that the Makkans feared the impact on their trade with these countries and voiced their concerns with the Prophet, so he calmed their worries by informing them that they soon will not have to worry about these lands being under Persian and Roman rule. This interpretation wards off any possible clashes with the historical events that occurred after the Prophet, since when Syria was lost from Roman rule it never returned.

Ṭaḥāwī also brings another earlier interpretation by one of his teachers, Ahmad ibn Abī Ṭāmān (d. 894).28 Ibn Abī Ṭāmān says this event had not yet taken place and the destruction of Caesar spoken of in this *ḥadīth* is what will eventuate in the future, at a similar time as the appearance of the Antichrist before the end of the world. Ibn Abī Ṭāmān even provides a reason for why the Caesar’s punishment was delayed and not for the Persian Emperor. He brings evidence to show, while the Caesar dealt with great respect to the letter of the Prophet

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26 Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾāthār*, vol. 1, 444.
27 Muslim historians have documented the Prophet said this while an emissary from the Persian empire was in his presence.
28 Other than being a Hanafi *ḥadīth* scholar and an influential teacher of Ṭaḥāwī, I have not found other information about this figure.
sent to him, the Persian leader, in contrast, tore the letter immediately and earned the curse of the Prophet. Ṭahāwī shows his preference for Ibn Abi Ḥāmid’s interpretation due to a few reasons. The first reason Ṭahāwī presents is that al-Shāfi‘ī’s interpretation entails the Caesar had already been destroyed, whereas in reality he had not been literally destroyed and his kingdom only changed from Damascus to Rome. Ṭahāwī does not see a problem that the Caesar at the time of the Prophet died and was replaced by another Caesar. This may be due to him seeing “being destroyed” (halaka) as different from dying (which would be maut). In fact, Ṭahāwī opines the destruction of Caesar would be similar to the destruction of Chosroes. Another reason Ṭahāwī puts forward for preferring Ibn Abi Ḥāmid’s explanation is that the hadīth in some narrations mentions the treasuries of both empires will be spent by Muslims in the way of God. Ṭahāwī says, while this has occurred in relation to the treasures of the Persian empire, the same cannot be said about the Roman empire, further adding evidence against al-Shāfi‘ī’s interpretation. Ṭahāwī reminds the reader, while arguing for this view, that the Prophet’s promise is from God and God never breaks His promise.

In this hadīth of the destruction of Chosroes and Caesar, we see historical events after the Prophet potentially clashing with his prophecy. Just like Ṭahāwī finds it not possible for the Prophet’s words to go against historical events centuries before his life (such as the hadīth about the building of the two mosques), Ṭahāwī argues the same for events after his life. One can observe that nowhere in Ṭahāwī’s discussion of this report does he entertain the possibility of doubting the hadīth. In fact, he uses historical events and other hadīthic evidence to prefer one view over another. We see this in Ṭahāwī preferring the view of Ibn Abi Ḥāmid over al-Shāfi‘ī’s interpretation due to the former matching the narration better as well as the unfolding of historical events after the Prophet’s life. In this example, history is used not to reject the hadīth, as was initially expected, but to choose a more correct interpretation over a lesser one. This phenomenon is also witnessed in the hadīth where the Prophet is reported to have said: “There will not remain on earth after one hundred years a soul that is breathing.”

The apparent clash with what history had observed since this hadīth was uttered is obvious as Ṭahāwī was writing close to 300 years afterwards. In fact, Ṭahāwī’s main intention of trying to address this issue is not only to show the apparent meaning is not the intended one, but also to show that many from the generation of the Companions were aware of how this hadīth could be misunderstood. Ṭahāwī brings evidence from other narrations that the fourth Caliph Ali accused the narrator of this hadīth of having been mistaken and the hadīth was about those who were alive at the time the Prophet was saying it. Ali is quoted to have said “and don’t we only wait for good times after the one hundredth year?” Ṭahāwī brings evidence from other Companions, such as Abdullah ibn ‘Umar, Jabir and Anas to show many

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29 One could argue that al-Shāfi‘ī’s interpretation solves a potential conflict with the death of Caesar living at the time of the Prophet, while this other interpretation does not.
30 Ṭahāwī, Shahr mushkil al-athār, vol. 1, 347.
31 Ibid., 348.
other Companions were aware the hadīth related to those who were living at the time of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{32}  

In a sentence showing the apparent meaning is not real, Ṭahāwī uses an important phrase and says “the intended meaning of the aforementioned hadīth is not what the ignorant (jāhilūn) assume from what the observed evidences rejects (dafaʿahu al-ʿiyān).”\textsuperscript{33} Here we can see, for Ṭahāwī, it is impossible for authentic Prophetic hadīth to say something that definitive empirical evidence can reject. This general rule outlines Ṭahāwī’s underlying paradigm that, even though at surface level historical events may seem to clash with authentic prophetic hadīth, at a deeper level there is harmony. For Ṭahāwī, intrinsically doubtless historical occurrences cannot contradict doubtless prophetic sayings.  

Ṭahāwī explores other potential clashes with the “100 year” hadīth. He states there are reports that some of those people who converted to Islam after the death of the Prophet but were alive during his time (known as the mukhadrāmin), lived up to 140 years. Ṭahāwī offers two interpretations that perhaps the Prophet intended those alive from his followers and not others. Second, he states perhaps (a possibility he leans more towards) those mukhadrāmin who lived long may have all died before the 100 year mark. In summary, we see Ṭahāwī defending this hadīth and finding answers and possibilities to avoid potential clashes with historical evidence. Ṭahāwī never questions the aḥadīth nor deems them to be weak and untrue because of the clash with historical evidence.  

The three prophetic hadīth we have seen Ṭahāwī defend thus far are quite well-known and most are found in famous hadīth books like Bukhari and Muslim. All these hadīth are also to do with events that occurred either before the life of the Prophet or with events much later. Next, we find an example of a prophetic hadīth that occurred during the life of the Prophet and one that has been deemed weak due to sanad reasons is the event it took place at Ghadīr Khum.\textsuperscript{34} While travelling (either to or from Hajj), it is narrated the Prophet took ’Ali’s hand and said “whoever I am a mawlā (master, protecting friend) to, then so is ‘Ali a mawlā.’”\textsuperscript{35} The interlocutor, whom Ṭahāwī quotes, objects to this hadīth in the strongest terms by calling it “totally impossible” (mustaḥfīl), since history shows the Prophet’s cousin ‘Ali was in Yemen and only met the Prophet during the Hajj (nearly 200 kilometres from Ghadīr Khum). The contradiction here is how the Prophet could have said this when ’Ali was in Yemen at the time.  

Ṭahāwī’s answer to this objection is that it was possible this was on the return journey from Hajj. Ṭahāwī then brings a version of the hadīth\textsuperscript{36} in which he states none of its narrators can be impugned in any way, stating clearly this incident took place on the return trip. Ṭahāwī predicts the interlocutor might object again, bringing his own hadīthic evidence that the incident is claimed to have taken place on the way to Hajj. At this stage, what stands

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 349.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 350.  
\textsuperscript{34} Name of a place between Makkah and Medina.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, vol. 5, 13.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 18.
out is that these two hadith, which Ṭahāwī and his interlocutor bring as evidence to their claims, are irreconcilably opposite. Ṭahāwī, using his expertise about sanad criticism, brings numerous evidences that the ahadith that narrate that the event took place on the way to Hajj are much weaker and need to be abandoned for the stronger hadithic evidence that he had used.\(^{37}\)

Many commentators after Ṭahāwī have easily suggested that the Ghaḍīr Khum incident is a weak narration. Centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) clearly stated this incident took place on the 18th of Dhul hijjah, on the Prophet’s return from the Hajj yet shedding doubt on the whole incident by quoting ibn Hazm (d. 1064).\(^{38}\) Ibn Taymiyyah seems to cast doubt on the incident, claiming lengthier versions of this hadith are fabrications and even this shorter version has been deemed weak by many. Much could be said about the reasons why Ibn Taymiyyah may have taken that position, the least of which could be the main reason he wrote his book Minhāj al-Sunnah, which was mainly to refute a famous Shi‘i book written in his time with a similar title. What is significant is that, had Ṭahāwī wished, he could have easily dismissed the hadith of Ghaḍīr Khum as a weak report or fabricated because it clashed significantly with a historical incident. Instead, we see him entertaining possibilities to ‘save’ this hadith, bringing further historical or hadithic evidence to back this possibility and lastly arguing against potential counter-evidential hadith. This shows the care Ṭahāwī took when dealing with prophetic hadith of even questionable sanad strength. None would claim that Ṭahāwī had any bias in defending this hadith due to sectarian views as he explicitly shows his preference for the order of the first four caliphs in his creedal book Al-‘Aqidah at-Ṭahāwīyya (a book often considered as a standard for the Sunni creed).\(^{39}\)

This extra caution that Ṭahāwī exercises with prophetic hadith is sometimes observed in his dealings with statements from the Companions. One example of this is the reports about whether certain verses from the Qur’an (13:43 and 46:10) were revealed in relation to the famous Companion of the Prophet ṬAbdullāh ibn Salām, a former Jewish scholar who converted to Islam. Ṭahāwī quotes famous figures from the second generation after the Companions such as Sha‘īb and Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr (d. 714) as using historical anachronism in dismissing any claims of these verses (which were revealed in Mecca) having being revealed about ṬAbdullāh ibn Salām, a man who converted years later in Medina. Ṭahāwī first shows there is no prophetic hadith whether this verse was revealed about ṬAbdullāh ibn Salām. He then explains the possibility that a surah can be revealed in Mecca while a single verse from that surah can be revealed years later in Medina and inserted. Ṭahāwī then quotes a hadith of lesser authenticity in which ṬAbdullāh ibn Salām states the verses were revealed about him. Ṭahāwī’s preference for the view that the verse was revealed about ṬAbdullāh ibn Salām becomes clear.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., see discussion on pages 20-25.


\(^{39}\) Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ṭahāwī and Hamza Yusuf, The Creed of Imam al-Ṭahāwī (Berkeley, Calif.: Zaytuna Institute, 2008), 76.
One cannot help but conclude that Ṭaḥāwī prefers ‘Abdullāh ibn Salām’s (a Companion) statements over non-Companions’ statements. This could be because ‘Abdullāh ibn Salām was an eyewitness to the events and would know more about the event than those who came much after him. Brunelle, in her dissertation on Ṭaḥāwī, has also shown that Ṭaḥāwī like other early Hanafite scholars gave extra value to the Companions’ reports because of the potential of them being inspired by the Prophet’s words or actions. This possibility certainly comes to mind when Ṭaḥāwī is seen as continuously weakening and rejecting counter evidences that were cited in this section of Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār.

These few examples scattered across Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār show Ṭaḥāwī easily rejects non-prophetic ḥadīth due to historical anachronisms yet defends, interprets and explores possibilities and ways to “save” prophetic ḥadīth when they face the same challenge. Although the answer might appear clear why Ṭaḥāwī would take this difference in approach with the two types of ḥadīth, it is worthwhile mentioning some reasons that Ṭaḥāwī states throughout his magnum corpus.

**Why the Extra Care?**

One can witness Ṭaḥāwī’s approach toward ḥadīth when he is discussing the ḥadīth that mentions “if a Qur’ān is written on ihāb (skin), and that skin is put in the fire, the Qur’ān will not burn.”40 In this section, Ṭaḥāwī’s “humility” is really highlighted at the end of his discussion. Ṭaḥāwī presents two interpretations of this ḥadīth from the “people of knowledge” that came before him. After mentioning these two interpretations, Ṭaḥāwī says:

> both these interpretations are possible and probable that our Prophet sws intended one of these meanings…or our Prophet sws may have intended a meaning other than these two meanings which we have not come across yet nor has our level of knowledge reached it till now, and from God do we ask for success.41

Ṭaḥāwī reminds the reader that not being in a position to deliver absolute judgment on a prophetic ḥadīth, for coming generations may find out more information, interpretations or explanations, is a very humble and required attitude that a student of prophetic ḥadīth is to take. Ṭaḥāwī quotes the prophetic command in the ḥadīth: “convey what you hear from me, for it might be that the one who it is conveyed to may know more than the one who is conveying.”42 He dedicates a small chapter to a ḥadīth very similar to this one.43 As a muḥaddith (ḥadīth compiler), Ṭaḥāwī sees it as his role to defend the ḥadīth corpus to the best of his ability yet at the same time be wary of his limitations and the ability of upcoming generations to explain further and solve mysteries that he could not solve. One could also relate a very relevant Qur’ānic verse that could be the conscious or subconscious reason

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41 Ibid., 364.
42 Ibid., vol. 4.
43 Ibid., vol. 4, 282-286.
behind Ṭahāwī’s approach: “Rather, they have denied that which they encompass not in knowledge and whose interpretation has not yet come to them.”

We have already come across Ṭahāwī’s statements about the reverence to be shown towards hadīth by his quotation of the fourth Caliph ‘Alī that the best is to be thought of and interpreted upon hearing prophetic hadīth. When prophecies of the Prophet have been discussed, especially those Ṭahāwī believed had yet not occurred, we see Ṭahāwī reassuring the reader that those prophecies will eventuate as “they are from God, the Exalted.” While this position is common to many hadīth scholars, the unique revelatory status Ṭahāwī affords to hadīth literature is also worth highlighting.

For Ṭahāwī, the Qur‘ān and sunna (albeit the authentic one) are not as ontologically distinct as they may have been for others like al-Shāf‘ī. Brunelle shows in her study of Ṭahāwī’s methodology of Islamic law and his practical hermeneutics that the Qur‘ān can abrogate the sunna and the sunna can abrogate the Qur‘ān. Ṭahāwī says this is because they are both have the same form (shakl).

For Ṭahāwī, the Prophet did not utter a single word that was not in line with revelation. To prove this point, he mentions an incident where a man asks him, if he believes in God and fights for the sake of God, would all his sins be forgiven. The Prophet replies in the affirmative. Moments later, the Prophet asks for the same questioner to be brought back and asks him to repeat what he understood from the Prophet. When the man repeats the answer, the Prophet says it is correct except for debts and then the Prophet is reported to have said “here is Gabriel telling me this.” From here, Ṭahāwī argues, just like this small incident, the angel Gabriel was always revealing God’s messages to the Messenger of God and sometimes making small corrections. From such passages, we can see just how much of an elevated status Ṭahāwī affords to the sunna. This unique status that Ṭahāwī holds for the sunna is key to understanding his different approaches in critiquing prophetic and non-prophetic ahadīth.

**Other Uses of Historical Information**

Ṭahāwī’s use of historical information to assess hadīth narrations should not be seen in a limited binary fashion where he simply either weakens (due to historical data) or defends a hadīth. In fact, a spectrum of different ways is observed in how Ṭahāwī uses historical evidence. History, for Ṭahāwī, is not always a source of conflict; it can be part of the

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45 Ṭahāwī, Shārīr mushkil al-ṭāhār, vol. 1, 449.
47 The following paragraph illustrates how Ṭahāwī sees hadīth as much as revelation as the Qur‘ān. This view might come across as controversial, but such debate does exist among usūl al-fiqh discussions. For further clarity, see Brunelle’s discussion of this in her thesis (Brunelle, “From Text to Law,” 67-94).
49 An extremely summarised difference between Sunnah and hadīth may be that the former is the prophetic legacy found in historical reports called hadīth. However, the discussion is much more nuanced than this and great literature exists around these terminologies and the evolutions that took place in how Sunnah is understood and differentiated from hadīth in scholarly works.
solution. We find many instances in Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾathār where apparently opposing ahadīth are reconciled by using historical information. An example of this is when Ṭahāwī addresses the issue of various narrations claiming different chapters of the Qurʾān as being the last surah revealed. A narration from Aisha mentions the last surah was Maida while another report from Companion al-Barāʾ claims it was surah al-Tawba. Ṭahāwī brings in as evidence other relevant facts about the contexts of certain verses within surah al-Tawba to show it was revealed more than year before the death of the Prophet. Although al-Barāʾ’s hadīth is found in Bukhari and Muslim, Ṭahāwī, after bringing all his evidences, rests his case by stating “this goes to prove what Aisha said and negates what was said by al-Barāʾ.”

In this example, history is used to prefer one hadīth about the chronological order of one historical event (the revelation of a chapter) over another. The individual ahadīth did not clash with historical information; they only clashed with one another. Other cases of contradictory hadīth that appear to have no connection with history or the chronology of events are also at times strangely solved by reference to history.

An example of history being used to solve what appears to be a non-historical type of conflict is the case of different ahadīth pointing to two women as being the ‘greatest’ of the daughters of the Prophet. The Prophet is recorded to have praised his daughter Zaynab, after her difficult migration to Medina (during which she loses an unborn child) as “she is greatest of my daughters who has suffered because of me.”

What may appear as a contradiction to this hadīth is what is famously narrated about the Prophet praising his daughter Fatima the most and saying “she is the master of all women and the master of the women of paradise.”

Ṭahāwī also narrates some of the tension this hadīth caused to Ali ibn Husayn, the grandchild of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet. It is recorded he went to ‘Urwa ibn Zubayr and directly complained to him about this hadīth that he narrates “which takes away from the rights of Fatima.” ‘Urwa affectionately reminds him that he had no intention of doing such thing and promises to not narrate that hadīth again. This small incident does show, however, that ahadīth were seen as contradictory and a source of conflict. While dealing with this issue, Ṭahāwī addresses another side issue that also appears to contradict certain Islamic law.

In the hadīth that deals with Zaynab, it is narrated the Prophet asks his formerly adopted son Zayd to go to Mecca and bring Zaynab to Medina. Zayd, not being a blood relative of Zaynab nor married to her, would be normally deemed not permissible by Islamic law as an escort.

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50 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾathār, vol. 6, 309.
51 This is a non-prophetic hadīth.
53 Ṭahāwī is not attempting to disprove the claim that Baraʾ, the Companion, said this. The hadīth of Baraʾ claims this surah might be authentic and this may be why it appears in Bukhari and Muslim. Ṭahāwī is simply negating the accuracy of the statement. According to Ṭahāwī, Baraʾ may have said this but he most likely was mistaken on the matter.
54 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-ʾathār, vol. 1, 133.
55 Ibid., 138.
56 Ibid., 134.
History comes to the rescue in this situation, at least according to Ṭahāwī’s interpretation. Ṭahāwī theorises, at the time when the Prophet praised Zaynab, his daughter Fatima had not reached puberty. Ṭahāwī then delves into different hadīth collecting data about the life of Fatima to bring in evidence of the age at which she died (25 or 29), how soon after the Prophet’s death was her death (six months) and her possible age when the Prophet praised Zaynab for being above ten (biḍ’at āʿashara sана). Ṭahāwī shows, by bringing diverse historical evidences, it was quite possible Fatima had not reached puberty; hence, she had not reached her later high station and lofty rank where she was so especially praised by the Prophet. So, for Ṭahāwī, praise for any woman other than Fatima (Ṭahāwī also includes a hadīth that mentions Aisha as a possible contradiction) can be interpreted as praise for them before Fatima reached puberty. As for the contradiction to Islamic law of a man and woman travelling alone, Ṭahāwī shows, at that time, Zayd was still Zaynab’s adopted brother. This was before the time when the new Islamic law came that differentiated between real sons (by blood) and adopted sons.

In the above example, apparently two contradictory aḥādīth that have nothing to do with the chronological order of historical events are analysed. Ṭahāwī turns to history to bring clarity by highlighting, when one is cognisant of time, perfect harmony can exist among otherwise conflicting hadīth. It is also interesting to note that Ṭahāwī cites more than eight aḥādīth in this section. Where one would have normally expect two apparently contradictory aḥādīth to have “sunk,” history is used to paint a more holistic picture and eight aḥādīth are “saved.”

We see another example of history being unexpectedly used to prefer one hadīth over another with it comes to the genre of asbāb al-nuzūl (contexts of revelation). There exist many aḥādīth explaining the context of revelation behind many verses in the Qur’an. In the case of verse 24 of surah Fath, we find two drastically different contexts of revelation. The verse can be translated to mean: “And it is He who withheld their hands from you and your hands from them within [the area of] Makkah after He caused you to overcome them. And ever is Allah of what you do, Seeing.” In one report, Companion Anas is reported to have said the verse was revealed after a group of 70 (or 80) men from Quraysh tried attacking the Prophet and his Companions at Tan’im (a place very close to Mecca) during the early dawn prayers. The surprise attack does not go ahead as planned and the Prophet takes them as captives, forgives them and returns them. In a different report, narrated by Miswar (Companion) and Marwān (non-Companion), the verse was revealed after a few Muslim fugitives who had escaped from Quraysh were harassing Meccan trade caravans. This troubled Quraysh so much that their leader Abu Sufyān begged the Prophet to accept them into Medina after initially placing a condition in the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah that no fugitive from Mecca will be accepted into Medina.

As was mentioned earlier in this article, Ṭahāwī makes it clear that none of these reports are from the Prophet; hence, there is no contradiction in the Prophet’s wording. By extension,

one can conclude that Ṭahāwī sees these two non-prophetic *ahadīth* as contradictory. Since he treats them as historical reports (non-revelatory in nature), Ṭahāwī analyses their content without discussing their *sanad*. Both *hadīth* are well known and found in famous books such as Bukhari and Muslim. Ṭahāwī alludes from the given discussion that his evidence gives weight to the report that Anas reported about 70 men trying to attack the Prophet and his Companions near Makkah. Although Ṭahāwī cites one other report that seems to support Anas’ report, Ṭahāwī’s main arguments come from comparing the two events to the actual verse of the Qur’ān. Ṭahāwī shows the verse clearly points to the location as being near Makkah (*min baṭni Makkah*) and a clear victory took place. Ṭahāwī argues both facts are found in Anas’ version and not in the other report.

Ṭahāwī’s appeal to the Qur’ān in the above example can be explained in a way that shows his conviction for there to be no possibility for the “Book of God” to contradict historical events. Ṭahāwī also shares this conviction for authentic prophetic *ahadīth*. From another angle, however, the same analysis can be seen as a secular approach of a historian trying to arrive at the most correct version of historical events. Using the Qur’ānic verse in this lens is simply using a historical source that is mass narrated (*mutawātir*). Ṭahāwī, in this secular analysis, is simply choosing the historical report that has the least number of contradictions. Highlighting this secular approach Ṭahāwī takes in fact shows his religious sensitivities. Once it is clear the reports are not revelatory (non-prophetic), Ṭahāwī subjects all reports to the laboratory of historical analysis and does not restrict himself in any way. One can hypothesise that Ṭahāwī prefers the report by Anas the Companion over that of Marwān (a non-Companion)58 because of the respect Ṭahāwī has for Companions of the Prophet. This reminds us of the previous example where the words of Companions are dealt with extra sensitivity than other mere historical reports, as was seen in the case of ’Abdullāh ibn Salām. However, preferring Anas’ narration over Marwān’s is something any historian could have done despite what their faith subjectivities may suggest to him, as it is purely a matter of preferring an eyewitness report over a non-eyewitness report. We are highlighting both ways of viewing Ṭahāwī’s analysis to show, when it comes to dealing with non-revelatory *hadīth* reports, an almost secular approach can be taken.

A reader of Ṭahāwī’s work is not entirely certain what Ṭahāwī actually makes of the *hadīth* narrated by Marwān. Does he see it as a fabricated report or an opinion by Marwān with which Ṭahāwī simply does not agree? Regardless of the answer, the reader knows that Ṭahāwī in one way rejects the report, just like he rejects the report of Companion al-Barā‘ discussed previously about which chapter of the Qur’ān was revealed last. In some cases, Ṭahāwī uniquely accepts both reports relating to the context of revelation of a verse using historical analysis while laying out new approaches to be found in the genre of asbāb al-nuzūl.

58 A report from Marwān would be deemed a *mursal* *hadīth* due to the missing Companion link. Although the other narrator, Miswar, is a Companion, because he was so young, it is clear he and Marwān were narrating the event from other Companions.
Like the above example of different reports regarding the context of one verse in the Qurʾān, we find two authentically reported narrations about verse 128 of surah al-ʾImrān. A translation of this verse would read: “none of this matter concerns you.”\(^{59}\) One asbāb al-nuzūl says it was when the Prophet cursed the hypocrites of Medina and another says the Prophet was praying against the polytheists of Mecca.\(^{60}\) Yet another narration has it that the Prophet cursed the Quraysh after his tooth was broken during the battle of Uḥud.\(^{61}\) Ṭahāwī entertains three possibilities after narrating these aḥadīth. The first is that it could have been that the verse was revealed once in response to both causes of revelation. Ṭahāwī, however, sees this as a distant possibility because the Uḥud expedition took place in the third year after Hijra while the conquest of Makkah was years later (both events are significant to the three narrations). The second possibility is that the verses were revealed twice as Qurʾānic verses. Ṭahāwī also discounts this possibility by reasoning, had this been the case, the verse should have appeared twice in the Qurʾān. Ṭahāwī gives an example here of another verse appearing twice in the Qurʾān with the exact same wording to show the verse was revealed on two separate occasions based on distinct contexts of revelation. The last possibility that remains is the verse was revealed as Qurʾānic revelation once and non-Qurʾānic revelation a second time.\(^{62}\) Ṭahāwī finishes this section by saying no better possible explanation was found other than this last one.\(^{63}\)

Ṭahāwī’s use of historical data about the chronology of events during the time of the Prophet to discount one way of explanation clearly stands out. Here, history is used to prefer one explanation of a potential contradiction over another. Ṭahāwī also weaves his rare exegetical rules into the discussion. For example, his rule that, if a verse is revealed twice, it would appear twice in the Qurʾān.\(^{64}\) His entertaining the third possibility is also a reflection of the permeability between Qurʾānic and non-Qurʾānic (sunna) revelation.\(^{65}\) Once again, the unique status Ṭahāwī confers to sunna is highlighted and becomes a key ingredient in solving something that would otherwise most likely remain an unsolved contradiction. The reader is not sure why Ṭahāwī does not prefer one of the narrations over another\(^{66}\) and instead makes jamʿ (reconciling different aḥadīth without discounting any). Perhaps he saw no contradictions within them and the associated Qurʾānic verse (unlike the previous example about verse 48:24) and perhaps he was satisfied with their sanad strength. What is clear


\(^{60}\) Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, vol. 2, 42.

\(^{61}\) Though Ṭahāwī brings his own haddīth that he has collected while presenting these three options, the editor highlights all these haddīth exist in the canonical six haddīth collections, including Bukhari and Muslim.

\(^{62}\) Such that the meaning is revealed by God, but the words are not intended to take a place within the Qurʾānic text as a verse. In the case of this example, there is fluidity between what is deemed Qurʾānic and what is not.

\(^{63}\) Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, vol. 2, 44.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{65}\) As alluded to before, the difference between Quranic revelation and non-Quranic revelation is not as ontologically different to Ṭahāwī as it may be for others. Ṭahāwī sees them both as revelation with the difference only being one is recited in ritual prayer while the other is not. The author of the ‘meaning’ of a prophetic haddīth for Ṭahāwī is God in as much as the author of the ‘letter’ and the ‘meaning’ of the Qurʾān is God for others.

\(^{66}\) A process referred to as tarjih in haddīth terminology.
though is, if historical data was not used, the unique approaches of Ṭahāwī’s exegetical hermeneutics would not have flourished.

One criticism that can be made about Ṭahāwī is that it is not clear when removing a contradiction between two hadīth (or between hadīth and historical information) is viewed as the means and when removing this contradiction is viewed as the end. This can lead to a circular argument, making it difficult for the researcher who is trying to identify consistent principles of application of historical anachronism.

Other than this inconvenient difficulty, one can still draw generic conclusions from Ṭahāwī’s approach towards the 13 cases discussed in this paper, which have been summarised in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ḥadīth</th>
<th>Marfū’</th>
<th>Defended</th>
<th>Clash?</th>
<th>Sanad strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Jarīr becoming Muslim</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ‘Abdullāh ibn Salām</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Exile of Ahl al-Kitāb</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Funeral of Umm Habiba</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tamattu’ type of hajj</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Marwan and Miswar’s version</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. First two mosques</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Caeser and Chosroe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. No soul after 100 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ghadīr Khum</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Last revealed surah (al-Barā)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Greatest daughter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Surah ‘Imran: 28</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the 13 cases relevant to historical analysis, we find Ṭahāwī weakens or totally dismisses four. This process of strong content criticism takes place despite the sanad strengths of these hadīth. None of these, however, can be considered ‘prophetic ḥadīth’ strictly speaking; hence, are not marfū’. Of the prophetic ḥadīth examples analysed in this article, Ṭahāwī defends all the marfū’ ḥadīth with the exception of the exiling of the ‘ahl al-kitāb’ (Christians and Jews) ḥadīth. This ḥadīth does not seem to be an exception to the rule though, as other versions of the ḥadīth already exist and Ṭahāwī uses historical evidence to choose those other narrations. Ṭahāwī’s defence of ḥadīth even takes place when the ḥadīth at hand has questionable sanad strength (such as the Ghadīr Khum one). All the cases where

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67 This is based on primarily how the editor of Sharh mushkil al-mithār, Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ī, assesses them.

68 The ḥadīth about the tamattu’ type of hajj is not an exception to this. The phrase to which Ṭahāwī objected was not part of the quoted speech of the Prophet. A ‘yes/no’ description has been placed in the table in case some might consider it prophetic only because it is claimed it was said in the presence of the Prophet and he did not disapprove of it.
TAHAWI dismisses the hadith at hand are non-prophetic. When deciding between two choices of non-prophetic ahadith, Tahawī selects the report from a more senior Companion. In fact, what the above table shows is Tahawī’s hermeneutical flexibility is inversely proportional to the raf” nature of the hadith.69 The higher the authority for the speaker of the hadith, the more reluctant Tahawī is to dismiss the hadith. In other words, the moment the hadith can be said to be revelatory material, we find Tahawī rejecting fewer of those ahadith based on historical anachronism.

CONCLUSION

In the 13 examples where Tahawī deals with hadith that seem to contain information that appears to contradict history in this article, we have witnessed a spectrum of ways in which Tahawī employs historical information when dealing with “difficulties” in the hadith literature. Tahawī bravely uses history to weaken ahadith of the highest level of authenticity from a sanad perspective. This was observed, for example, in the hadith that states the companion Jarīr became Muslim 40 days before the death of the Prophet. However, the use of history to weaken hadith is not an unrestricted rule, according to Tahawī. When it came to the hadith about the two sacred mosques being ‘placed’ 40 years apart, we saw Tahawī not dismissing the hadith based on historical impossibility; rather, he interprets the word ‘placed/built.’ My analysis of Tahawī’s application of this rule and him desisting from applying this rule has led me to the conclusion that, if a hadith has a possibility of containing revelatory material, Tahawī exercises a great amount of caution and hermeneutical flexibility to not dismiss it.

One of the reasons why this rule is observed in Tahawī’s works at a more pronounced level is perhaps the unique ontological value he believes the sunna of the Prophet carries. We have also seen Tahawī using history in artistic ways to remove observed contradictions in the hadith literature. The different ahadith about which daughter of the Prophet was the most praised is one example of this. Tahawī also uses historical reasoning to dismiss certain interpretations and consequently arrives at new conclusions and possibilities in the field of exegetical studies.

Interestingly, we have not witnessed Tahawī dismiss historical data. If certain historical information has been quoted by his interlocutors whom he often cites as a potential clash to a hadith, we have only seen Tahawī affirm those historical facts and interpret or reject the hadith. In other words, Tahawī does not reject the history. This might be due to him only exploring serious possibilities of historical contradictions in hadith literature and not quoting those contradictions, which were not contradictions in the first place. Tahawī never takes an approach of history is true and so is the Prophet’s words, but perhaps God is testing us in our faith whether we believe the verdict of history or the Prophet. As ridiculous as this may sound to some, such approaches are not observed in Tahawī’s works because his underlying

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69 Whether the hadith is deemed marfīʿ or mawq mawqūf – hadith being prophetic or at the level of the Companions, respectively.
paradigm of revelation and cosmic events is that they are parallel works, each affirming one another.

At certain places, Ṭahāwī uses statements such as “hence there is not in this ḥadīth, all praise be to Allah, what would require its impossibility.” One can conclude from such phrases that Ṭahāwī is implying, when it totally becomes impossible to find an interpretation to reconcile a hadīth with historical knowledge and the historical knowledge makes the hadīth be deemed “impossible” (istiḥāla), then perhaps at these situations even prophetic hadīth that are soundly narrated can be questioned. These phrases leave room to even come up with more fine cut rules from Ṭahāwī’s works. What one needs to keep in mind, however, is in the 15 volumes of Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār Ṭahāwī is discussing hadīth that have reached him through authentic channels.

Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that some of the criteria Ṭahāwī highlights when assessing hadīth, such as prophetic hadīth requiring extra care, such rules should not be compared or applied to aḥadīth that one comes across when reading mawḍūʿāt literature (books on fabricated aḥadīth). The key difference is, in mawḍūʿāt literature, each author compiles aḥadīth that they believe to be fabricated. In Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, Ṭahāwī brings aḥadīth (as he mentions in the first paragraph of his work) that he believes to be authentic and aims to explain that they are not contradictory. This key difference should be kept in mind so one does not try to apply Ṭahāwī’s rules to aḥadīth found in mawḍūʿāt books and find them non-applicable.

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70 Ṭahāwī, Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār, vol. 1, 110.
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