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## THE USE OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION IN CONDUCTING CONTENT CRITICISM IN *ḤADĪTH*

Mir Sadeq Ansari\*

**Abstract:** Rejecting *ḥadīth* based on it contradicting known historical events has been deemed an accepted principle of content (*matn*) criticism among classical *ḥadīth* 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-Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī often uses this principle to reject what would normally be deemed very authentic *ḥadīth*. However, when the *ḥadīth* is ‘raised’ – that is, it is a prophetic *ḥadīth* (*marfū‘*) – we find Ṭaḥāwī exercises flexible hermeneutical skills and defends the *ḥadīth*.

**Keywords:** *ḥadīth, matn, history, Prophet Muhammad*

### INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship in content criticism in *ḥadīth* studies has grown and evidence is mounting that content (*matn*) criticism of all sorts existed as early as the second and third centuries after Hijra<sup>1</sup> (approximately 700-800 CE).<sup>2</sup> These findings come against the backdrop that early Muslim *ḥadīth* scholarship only focussed on *sanad* (chains of narrators) criticism. If an inquisitive student of *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* with historical information. How was a *ḥadīth* scholar meant to have dealt with a *ḥadīth* that contained contradictory information to historical events? As part of a broader study,<sup>3</sup> this article analyses the works of Abu Ja‘far Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933) in his magnum opus, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*. A flag bearer of orthodox Islam, Ṭaḥāwī’s dealings with *ḥadīth* will surprise the modernist critic of the *ḥadīth* corpus as well as traditionalist conservative Muslims.

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

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<sup>1</sup> The journey of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Brown, “How we Know Early Hadīth Critics did Matn Criticism and why it’s so Hard to Find,” *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2008): 143-184.

<sup>3</sup> This article is a chapter from a dissertation thesis dealing with how Ṭaḥāwī 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Sha'abī (d. 721) says it was impossible for two verses of the Qur'ān speaking of a learned man from the Children of Israel having converted to Islam being 'Abdullāh ibn Salām (d. 663), a famous Jewish convert Companion. Sha'abī says this is not possible as the surahs (chapters) of the Qur'ān that contain these verses were revealed in Mecca while 'Abdullāh 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*.<sup>5</sup>

## 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*.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> The editor of *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūtī (d. 2016), highlights the late ultra-strict *ḥadīth* scholar Albany deemed this *ḥadīth* as authentic (*sahih*) 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

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

<sup>5</sup> See Miṣbāḥ Allāh 'Abd al-Bāqī, *Al-Imām Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥāwī wa-atharuhu fī naqd al-ḥadīth* [Imam Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥāwī: His Impact in the Field of *Ḥadīth* Criticism] (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2010). 'Abd al-Bāqī mentions Ṭaḥāwī used this principle and gives a single example; however, does not delve into Ṭaḥāwī's criteria when using this principle.

<sup>6</sup> This will be shown in the upcoming example of Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah's version of *ḥadīth* being deemed as improbable.

<sup>7</sup> Abū Ja'far Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* [Explanation of the Difficulties found in *Ḥadīth* Narrations], ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūtī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2010), vol. 6, 299.

Islam only 40 days before the Prophet's death.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, centuries later, the famous *ḥadīth* scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) deems this *ḥadīth* as weak<sup>9</sup> for the exact same reason as Ṭaḥāwī, most likely benefitting from Ṭaḥāwī's arguments.<sup>10</sup>

Even more shocking to modern sceptics of early *matn* criticism as well as ultra conservative Muslims is the example of Ṭaḥāwī taking issue with the wording of a *ḥadīth* narrated by Sufyān ibn ʿUyaynah<sup>11</sup> (d. 814) that appears in Bukhari and Muslim. Ibn ʿUyaynah narrates the Prophet implied that he intended to exile the polytheists in totality from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>12</sup> Ṭaḥāwī brings many reasons when he deals with the wording of this *ḥadīth*, among them highlighting that, at the time of the Prophet's death, there had been no polytheists remaining in the Arabian Peninsula. Ṭaḥāwī claims he believes the incorrect wording was due to Ibn ʿUyaynah relying too much on his memory for his narrations instead of writing them down.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Ṭaḥāwī argues the real wording may have been 'Jews and Christians' of the region in place of the word 'polytheists.'<sup>14</sup> This *ḥadīth* is interesting in the context of Ṭaḥāwī rejecting not any *ḥadīth*, but prophetic *ḥadīth*,<sup>15</sup> due to historical anachronism. This comes with certain conditions, which will be discussed later.

Another vivid example of Ṭaḥāwī 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.<sup>16</sup> Ṭaḥāwī says, as he points to the flaw in this *ḥadīth*, it was well known that Umm Ḥabiba lived for a long time (*dahr<sup>an</sup> ṭawīl<sup>an</sup>*) after Umar. Ṭaḥāwī then brings other evidence to show other *ḥadīth*ic evidence shows the wife of the Prophet that died was Zaynab b. Jaḥsh (d. 641).

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

<sup>8</sup> Shuʿayb al-Arnāʿūṭ highlights the late Albany included this *ḥadīth* in his *sahih* category due to him only occupying himself with *sanad* and totally neglecting the *matn* of the *ḥadīth*.

<sup>9</sup> Deeming a *ḥadīth* weak is in essence rejecting *ḥadīth*it. The choice of word 'weak' is often used as *ḥadīth* scholars try to not use absolute terms unless they absolutely need to. I have tried to use this same approach. Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 6, 301.

<sup>11</sup> Sufyān ibn ʿUyaynah is one of the giants of early *ḥadīth* transmitters. He is famously known for the large number of *ḥadīth* he has narrated as well as his genius intelligence.

<sup>12</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 7, 191. *Ḥadīth* narrated in Bukhari and Muslim also.

<sup>13</sup> Although Ṭaḥāwī is a great of defender of *ḥadīth* literature and at times a defender of the 'people of *ḥadīth*,' he often does not hold back from criticising some of the greatest figures from *ḥadīth* literature such as Zuhri, Sufyān ibn ʿUyaynah and Shuʿba.

<sup>14</sup> Ṭaḥāwī argues the term '*mushrik*' (polytheist) should not be applied to Christians and Jews because of what he argues their elevated status holds.

<sup>15</sup> While a *ḥadīth* can be the word of a Companion, a prophetic *ḥadīth* is something that is believed to have been uttered by the Prophet.

<sup>16</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 6, 331.

perform *‘umrah* during the months of hajj.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Ṭaḥāwī 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. Ṭaḥāwī finishes his argument by showing how other narrators of this *ḥadīth* from the famous narrator ‘Aṭā’ did not include this statement.

These few examples are found scattered throughout Ṭaḥāwī’s *Sharh Mushkil al-Āthār* and show practical applications of Ṭaḥāwī’s hermeneutics where he critically analyses the content of *aḥadīth* in relation to historical events. However, the reader may prematurely conclude from this that Ṭaḥāwī gives the green light for immediate rejection of *ḥadīth* regardless of its type and authenticity if it appears to conflict with historical evidence. To arrive at a more comprehensive conclusion of Ṭaḥāwī’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 Ṭaḥāwī is using a consistent methodology. Counter examples of where the first meaning from a *ḥadīth* 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 Ṭaḥāwī easily disregards *aḥadīth* are mainly of the type where the *ḥadīth* is weak from a *sanad* perspective to begin with. This is a common phenomenon that Brown has shown in his *ḥadīth* analysis by delving into *mawḍū‘āt* literature (forged *aḥadīth*).<sup>18</sup> Brown argues that scholars like ibn al-Jawzī of the fifth century criticised the content of *ḥadīth* and deem them to be forgeries; however, these *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth*. The *ḥadīth* are not claiming to transmit the words uttered by the Prophet of Islam, hence are not *marfū‘*.<sup>19</sup> For example, the *ḥadīth* of Jarīr 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 *ḥadīth* about a group of people performing the *tamattu‘* pilgrimage contains the words of the Prophet, but the statement Ṭaḥāwī 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 *ḥadīth* is the one narrated by ibn ‘Uyaynah where the Prophet expressed a wish to exile the polytheists. While analysing the different narrations, Ṭaḥāwī makes it clear that all the other narrations mention ‘Jews and Christians’ except for the narration of Ibn ‘Uyaynah. So, in this discussion, Ṭaḥāwī is using historical arguments to prove a specific version of the prophetic *ḥadīth* (one more widely narrated that mentions the Jews and Christians) over another narration (which mentions the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. 6, 225. Just like Ṭaḥāwī points out, the editor, Shu‘ayb al-Arnā‘ūt, also deems this *ḥadīth* as weak from a *sanad* perspective.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Brown, “The Rules of Matn Criticism: There Are No Rules,” *Islamic Law and Society* 19, no. 4 (2012): 366.

<sup>19</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), 62.

polytheists). What Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī as a source of revelation similar to the Qur’ān. The Islamic understanding of revelation is often divided into *al-waḥy al-matlū* (revelation that can be recited in ritual prayers) and *al-waḥy ḡayr al-matlū* (revelation that cannot be recited in ritual prayers). This takes a central theme in Ṭaḥāwī’s approach to content criticism of *ḥadīth* in relation to prophetic *aḥadīth*. Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī deals with apparently contradictory *aḥadīth* explaining the context of revelation for verse 24 of surah al-Fath.<sup>20</sup>

Ṭaḥāwī 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, Ṭaḥāwī 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). Ṭaḥāwī 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.”<sup>21</sup> Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī and something that he outlines in the opening paragraphs of his 15-volume magnum corpus *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*.

One could even say the liberality with which Ṭaḥāwī 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-ḡarām* (the Ka’ba in Mecca) and

<sup>20</sup> “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.” Qur’ān 48:24, accessed August 7, 2020, <https://Qur’an.com/48/24>.

<sup>21</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *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).”<sup>22</sup>

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 Ṭaḥāwī to reject this *ḥadīth* due to its obvious clash with historical knowledge. Ṭaḥāwī instead, after affirming the names of the builders (Abraham and David), turns to the wording of the *ḥadīth*. The Arabic word that is used in this *ḥadīth* for ‘placing’ is *waḍ‘*. Using the slight flexibility given by the difference between a ‘placer’ and ‘builder’ that this word allows, Ṭaḥāwī 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. Ṭaḥāwī interestingly states following this that “there is not in this *ḥadīth*, all praise be to Allah, what would require its impossibility.”<sup>23</sup>

Here, Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī 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, Ṭaḥāwī implies a *ḥadīth* (even a prophetic *ḥadīth*) can be abandoned if it contains an “impossibility.”

Ṭaḥāwī consequentially outlines his approach towards prophetic *ḥadīth* in the face of such difficulties in general by stating:

in this way, is it incumbent upon interpreting the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet as ‘Ali ibn abi Ṭālib said: ‘When you are narrated a *ḥadīth* 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.’<sup>24</sup>

Brown in his article refers to ‘Ali ibn Abi Ṭālib’s approach as “charitable,” one that encourages hermeneutical gymnastics to reconcile the *ḥadīth* with the Prophet’s reported words.<sup>25</sup> Ṭaḥāwī does not indicate any reason as to why he differs between a placer and builder except his duty to remove conflict from this *ḥadīth*. For Ṭaḥāwī, 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 Ṭaḥāwī’s works that he would respond to this objection by stating that rejecting a *ḥadīth* that has been authentically narrated, while there is an interpretation that does not make it irreconcilable with historical

<sup>22</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Bukhārī, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Karachi: Muhammad Sarid, 1966), accessed August 5, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/>, *ḥadīth* no.3366; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Jam‘iyat al-Maknaz al-Islamī, 2000), *ḥadīth* no. 520.

<sup>23</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, “The Rules of Matn Criticism,” 376.

knowledge, is an even weaker approach. The late Albanian editor of the manuscript of *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* that is being used for this research, Shu‘ayb Arnā‘ūt, 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-M‘ād* 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 *aḥadīth*, 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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 prophesies it will not re-establish itself.<sup>27</sup> 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-āthār*. 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-Shāf‘ī, 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-Shāf‘ī 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, Aḥmad ibn Abi ‘Imrān (d. 894).<sup>28</sup> Ibn abi ‘Imrān 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 abi ‘Imrān 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

<sup>26</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 444.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim historians have documented the Prophet said this while an emissary from the Persian empire was in his presence.

<sup>28</sup> 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. Ṭaḥāwī shows his preference for Ibn abi ‘Imrān’s interpretation due to a few reasons. The first reason Ṭaḥāwī presents is that al-Shāfī’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. Ṭaḥāwī 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 *māta*).<sup>29</sup> In fact, Ṭaḥāwī opines the destruction of Caesar would be similar to the destruction of Chosroe. Another reason Ṭaḥāwī puts forward for preferring Ibn Abi-‘Imrān’s explanation is that the *ḥadīth* in some narrations mentions the treasuries of both empires will be spent by Muslims in the way of God. Ṭaḥāwī 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-Shāfī’s interpretation. Ṭaḥāwī reminds the reader, while arguing for this view, that the Prophet’s promise is from God and God never breaks His promise.

In this *ḥadīth* of the destruction of Chosroe and Caesar, we see historical events after the Prophet potentially clashing with his prophecy. Just like Ṭaḥāwī finds it not possible for the Prophet’s words to go against historical events centuries before his life (such as the *ḥadīth* about the building of the two mosques), Ṭaḥāwī argues the same for events after his life. One can observe that nowhere in Ṭaḥāwī’s discussion of this report does he entertain the possibility of doubting the *ḥadīth*. In fact, he uses historical events and other *ḥadīth* evidence to prefer one view over another. We see this in Ṭaḥāwī preferring the view of Ibn Abi-‘Imrān over al-Shāfī’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 *ḥadīth*, as was initially expected, but to choose a more correct interpretation over a lesser one. This phenomenon is also witnessed in the *ḥadīth* where the Prophet is reported to have said: “There will not remain on earth after one hundred years a soul that is breathing.”<sup>30</sup>

The apparent clash with what history had observed since this *ḥadīth* was uttered is obvious as Ṭaḥāwī was writing close to 300 years afterwards. In fact, Ṭaḥāwī’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 *ḥadīth* could be misunderstood. Ṭaḥāwī brings evidence from other narrations that the fourth Caliph Ali accused the narrator of this *ḥadīth* of having been mistaken and the *ḥadīth* 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?”<sup>31</sup> Ṭaḥāwī brings evidence from other Companions, such as Abdullah ibn ‘Umar, Jabir and Anas to show many

<sup>29</sup> One could argue that al-Shāfī’s interpretation solves a potential conflict with the death of Caesar living at the time of the Prophet, while this other interpretation does not.

<sup>30</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 347.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

other Companions were aware the *ḥadīth* related to those who were living at the time of the Prophet.<sup>32</sup>

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

Ṭaḥāwī explores other potential clashes with the “100 year” *ḥadīth*. 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 *mukhaḍramīn*), lived up to 140 years. Ṭaḥāwī 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 *mukhaḍramīn* who lived long may have all died before the 100 year mark. In summary, we see Ṭaḥāwī defending this *ḥadīth* and finding answers and possibilities to avoid potential clashes with historical evidence. Ṭaḥāwī never questions the *aḥadīth* nor deems them to be weak and untrue because of the clash with historical evidence.

The three prophetic *ḥadīth* we have seen Ṭaḥāwī defend thus far are quite well-known and most are found in famous *ḥadīth* books like Bukhari and Muslim. All these *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* 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.<sup>34</sup> 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*’.”<sup>35</sup> The interlocutor, whom Ṭaḥāwī quotes, objects to this *ḥadīth* in the strongest terms by calling it “totally impossible” (*muṣtaḥīl*), 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.

Ṭaḥāwī’s answer to this objection is that it was possible this was on the return journey from Hajj. Ṭaḥāwī then brings a version of the *ḥadīth*<sup>36</sup> in which he states none of its narrators can be impugned in any way, stating clearly this incident took place on the return trip. Ṭaḥāwī predicts the interlocutor might object again, bringing his own *ḥadīthic* evidence that the incident is claimed to have taken place on the way to Hajj. At this stage, what stands

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>34</sup> Name of a place between Makkah and Medina.

<sup>35</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 5, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18.

out is that these two *ḥadīth*, which Ṭaḥāwī and his interlocutor bring as evidence to their claims, are irreconcilably opposite. Ṭaḥāwī, using his expertise about *sanad* criticism, brings numerous evidences that the *aḥadīth* that narrate that the event took place on the way to Hajj are much weaker and need to be abandoned for the stronger *ḥadīthic* evidence that he had used.<sup>37</sup>

Many commentators after Ṭaḥāwī have easily suggested that the Ghadīr 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).<sup>38</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah seems to cast doubt on the incident, claiming lengthier versions of this *ḥadīth* 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 Ṭaḥāwī wished, he could have easily dismissed the *ḥadīth* of Ghadīr Khum as a weak report or fabricated because it clashed significantly with a historical incident. Instead, we see him entertaining possibilities to 'save' this *ḥadīth*, bringing further historical or *ḥadīthic* evidence to back this possibility and lastly arguing against potential counter-evidential *ḥadīth*. This shows the care Ṭaḥāwī took when dealing with prophetic *ḥadīth* of even questionable *sanad* strength. None would claim that Ṭaḥāwī had any bias in defending this *ḥadīth* due to sectarian views as he explicitly shows his preference for the order of the first four caliphs in his creedal book *Al-ʿAqīdah at-Ṭaḥāwīyya* (a book often considered as a standard for the Sunni creed).<sup>39</sup>

This extra caution that Ṭaḥāwī exercises with prophetic *ḥadīth* 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'ān (13:43 and 46:10) were revealed in relation to the famous Companion of the Prophet ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām, a former Jewish scholar who converted to Islam. Ṭaḥāwī quotes famous figures from the second generation after the Companions such as Shaʿbī and Saʿīd ibn Jubayr (d. 714) as using historical anachronism in dismissing any claims of these verses (which were revealed in Mecca) having being revealed about ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām, a man who converted years later in Medina. Ṭaḥāwī first shows there is no prophetic *ḥadīth* whether this verse was revealed about ʿAbdullāh 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. Ṭaḥāwī then quotes a *ḥadīth* of lesser authenticity in which ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām states the verses were revealed about him. Ṭaḥāwī's preference for the view that the verse was revealed about ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām becomes clear.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., see discussion on pages 20-25.

<sup>38</sup> Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad Rashad Salim, *Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah* [The Way of the Prophetic Legacy] (Riyadh: al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Saʿudiyah, Jamīʿat al-Imam Muhammad ibn Suʿūd al-Islamiyyah, 1986), vol. 7, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ṭaḥāwī and Hamza Yusuf, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī* (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.”<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.”<sup>42</sup> He dedicates a small chapter to a *ḥadīth* very similar to this one.<sup>43</sup> 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

<sup>40</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 2, 363.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 282-286.

behind Ṭaḥāwī's approach: "Rather, they have denied that which they encompass not in knowledge and whose interpretation has not yet come to them."<sup>44</sup>

We have already come across Ṭaḥāwī's statements about the reverence to be shown towards *ḥadīth* by his quotation of the fourth Caliph 'Alī that the best is to be thought of and interpreted upon hearing prophetic *ḥadīth*. When prophecies of the Prophet have been discussed, especially those Ṭaḥāwī believed had yet not occurred, we see Ṭaḥāwī reassuring the reader that those prophecies will eventuate as "they are from God, the Exalted."<sup>45</sup> While this position is common to many *ḥadīth* scholars, the unique revelatory status Ṭaḥāwī affords to *ḥadīth* literature is also worth highlighting.

For Ṭaḥāwī, 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 Ṭaḥāwī'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.<sup>46</sup> Ṭaḥāwī says this is because they are both have the same form (*shakl*).<sup>47</sup>

For Ṭaḥāwī, 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."<sup>48</sup> From here, Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī affords to the *sunna*. This unique status that Ṭaḥāwī holds for the *sunna* is key to understanding his different approaches in critiquing prophetic and non-prophetic *aḥadīth*.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Other Uses of Historical Information***

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

<sup>44</sup> Qur'ān 10:39 – *Sahih International*, accessed August 6, 2020, <https://quran.com/10/39>.

<sup>45</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 449.

<sup>46</sup> Carolyn Anne Brunelle, "From Text to Law: Islamic Legal Theory and the Practical Hermeneutics of Abu Ja'far Ahmad Al-Tahawi (d. 321/933)" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 85.

<sup>47</sup> The following paragraph illustrates how Ṭaḥāwī sees *ḥadīth* as much as revelation as the Qur'ān. This view might come across as controversial, but such debate does exist among *uṣūl al-fiqh* discussions. For further clarity, see Brunelle's discussion of this in her thesis (Brunelle, "From Text to Law," 67-94).

<sup>48</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 8, 174.

<sup>49</sup> An extremely summarised difference between Sunnah and *ḥadīth* may be that the former is the prophetic legacy found in historical reports called *ḥadīth*. 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 *ḥadīth* in scholarly works.

solution. We find many instances in *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* where apparently opposing *aḥādīth* are reconciled by using historical information. An example of this is when Ṭaḥāwī 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-Barā claims it was surah al-Tawba.<sup>50</sup> Ṭaḥāwī 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-Barā's *ḥadīth*<sup>51</sup> is found in Bukhari and Muslim,<sup>52</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, after bringing all his evidences, rests his case by stating "this goes to prove what Aisha said and negates what was said by al-Barā."<sup>53</sup> In this example, history is used to prefer one *ḥadīth* about the chronological order of one historical event (the revelation of a chapter) over another. The individual *aḥādīth* did not clash with historical information; they only clashed with one another. Other cases of contradictory *ḥadīth* 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 *aḥādīth* 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."<sup>54</sup> What may appear as a contradiction to this *ḥadīth* 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."<sup>55</sup>

Ṭaḥāwī also narrates some of the tension this *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* that he narrates "which takes away from the rights of Fatima."<sup>56</sup> 'Urwa affectionately reminds him that he had no intention of doing such thing and promises to not narrate that *ḥadīth* again. This small incident does show, however, that *aḥādīth* were seen as contradictory and a source of conflict. While dealing with this issue, Ṭaḥāwī addresses another side issue that also appears to contradict certain Islamic law. In the *ḥadīth* 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.

<sup>50</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 6, 309.

<sup>51</sup> This is a non-prophetic *ḥadīth*.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 5, book 59, *ḥadīth* 390, accessed August 5, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/64/390>.

<sup>53</sup> Ṭaḥāwī is not attempting to disprove the claim that Bara, the Companion, said this. The *ḥadīth* of Bara claims this surah might be authentic and this may be why it appears in Bukhari and Muslim. Ṭaḥāwī is simply negating the accuracy of the statement. According to Ṭaḥāwī, Bara may have said this but he most likely was mistaken on the matter.

<sup>54</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 134.

History comes to the rescue in this situation, at least according to Ṭaḥāwī's interpretation. Ṭaḥāwī theorises, at the time when the Prophet praised Zaynab, his daughter Fatima had not reached puberty. Ṭaḥāwī then delves into different *ḥadīth* 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'ata 'ashara sana*). Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī, praise for any woman other than Fatima (Ṭaḥāwī also includes a *ḥadīth* 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, Ṭaḥāwī 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 *aḥadīth* that have nothing to do with the chronological order of historical events are analysed. Ṭaḥāwī turns to history to bring clarity by highlighting, when one is cognisant of time, perfect harmony can exist among otherwise conflicting *ḥadīth*. It is also interesting to note that Ṭaḥāwī cites more than eight *aḥadīth* in this section. Where one would have normally expect two apparently contradictory *aḥadīth* to have “sunk,” history is used to paint a more holistic picture and eight *aḥadīth* are “saved.”

We see another example of history being unexpectedly used to prefer one *ḥadīth* over another with it comes to the genre of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (contexts of revelation). There exist many *aḥadīth* explaining the context of revelation behind many verses in the Qur'ān. 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.”<sup>57</sup> 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, Ṭaḥāwī makes it clear that none of these reports are from the Prophet; hence, there is no contradiction in the Prophet's wording. By extension,

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<sup>57</sup> Quran 48:24 – *Sahih International*, accessed February 17, 2020, [www.quran.com/48/24](http://www.quran.com/48/24).

one can conclude that Ṭaḥāwī sees these two non-prophetic *aḥādīth* as contradictory. Since he treats them as historical reports (non-revelatory in nature), Ṭaḥāwī analyses their content without discussing their *sanad*. Both *ḥādīth* are well known and found in famous books such as Bukhari and Muslim. Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī cites one other report that seems to support Anas' report, Ṭaḥāwī's main arguments come from comparing the two events to the actual verse of the Qur'ān. Ṭaḥāwī shows the verse clearly points to the location as being near Makkah (*min baṭni Makkah*) and a clear victory took place. Ṭaḥāwī argues both facts are found in Anas' version and not in the other report.

Ṭaḥāwī'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. Ṭaḥāwī also shares this conviction for authentic prophetic *aḥādīth*. 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*). Ṭaḥāwī, in this secular analysis, is simply choosing the historical report that has the least number of contradictions. Highlighting this secular approach Ṭaḥāwī takes in fact shows his religious sensitivities. Once it is clear the reports are not revelatory (non-prophetic), Ṭaḥāwī subjects all reports to the laboratory of historical analysis and does not restrict himself in any way. One can hypothesise that Ṭaḥāwī prefers the report by Anas the Companion over that of Marwān (a non-Companion)<sup>58</sup> because of the respect Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī's analysis to show, when it comes to dealing with non-revelatory *ḥādīth* reports, an almost secular approach can be taken.

A reader of Ṭaḥāwī's work is not entirely certain what Ṭaḥāwī actually makes of the *ḥādīth* narrated by Marwān. Does he see it as a fabricated report or an opinion by Marwān with which Ṭaḥāwī simply does not agree? Regardless of the answer, the reader knows that Ṭaḥāwī 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, Ṭaḥāwī 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*.

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<sup>58</sup> A report from Marwān would be deemed a *mursal ḥādīth* 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 Qur'ān, we find two authentically reported narrations about verse 128 of surah al-‘Imrān. A translation of this verse would read: “none of this matter concerns you.”<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> Yet another narration has it that the Prophet cursed the Quraysh after his tooth was broken during the battle of Uḥud.<sup>61</sup> Ṭaḥāwī entertains three possibilities after narrating these *aḥādīth*. The first is that it could have been that the verse was revealed once in response to both causes of revelation. Ṭaḥāwī, however, sees this as a distant possibility because the Uhud 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 Qur'ānic verses. Ṭaḥāwī also discounts this possibility by reasoning, had this been the case, the verse should have appeared twice in the Qur'ān. Ṭaḥāwī gives an example here of another verse appearing twice in the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ānic revelation once and non-Qur'ānic revelation a second time.<sup>62</sup> Ṭaḥāwī finishes this section by saying no better possible explanation was found other than this last one.<sup>63</sup>

Ṭaḥāwī'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. Ṭaḥāwī 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 Qur'ān.<sup>64</sup> His entertaining the third possibility is also a reflection of the permeability between Qur'ānic and non-Qur'ānic (*sunna*) revelation.<sup>65</sup> Once again, the unique status Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī does not prefer one of the narrations over another<sup>66</sup> and instead makes *jam'* (reconciling different *aḥādīth* without discounting any). Perhaps he saw no contradictions within them and the associated Qur'ānic verse (unlike the previous example about verse 48:24) and perhaps he was satisfied with their *sanad* strength. What is clear

<sup>59</sup> Qur'ān 3:128 – *Sahih International*, accessed August 6, 2020, <https://quran.com/3/128>

<sup>60</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 2, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Though Ṭaḥāwī brings his own *ḥadīth* that he has collected while presenting these three options, the editor highlights all these *ḥadīth* exist in the canonical six *ḥadīth* collections, including Bukhari and Muslim.

<sup>62</sup> Such that the meaning is revealed by God, but the words are not intended to take a place within the Qur'ānic text as a verse. In the case of this example, there is fluidity between what is deemed Qur'ānic and what is not.

<sup>63</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 2, 44.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>65</sup> As alluded to before, the difference between Quranic revelation and non-Quranic revelation is not as ontologically different to Ṭaḥāwī as it may be for others. Ṭaḥāwī 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 *ḥadīth* for Ṭaḥāwī is God in as much as the author of the 'letter' and the 'meaning' of the Qur'ān is God for others.

<sup>66</sup> A process referred to as *tarjih* in *ḥadīth* terminology.

though is, if historical data was not used, the unique approaches of Ṭaḥāwī's exegetical hermeneutics would not have flourished.

One criticism that can be made about Ṭaḥāwī is that it is not clear when removing a contradiction between two *aḥādīth* (or between *aḥādīth* 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 Ṭaḥāwī's approach towards the 13 cases discussed in this paper, which have been summarised in the following table.

	<i>Ḥadīth</i>	<i>Marfū'</i>	Defended	Clash?	<i>Sanad</i> strength <sup>67</sup>
1.	Jarīr becoming Muslim	No	No	Yes	Strong
2.	'Abdullāh ibn Salām	No	Yes	Yes	Weak
3.	Exile of Ahl al-Kitāb	Yes	No	Yes	Strong
4.	Funeral of Umm Habiba	No	No	Yes	Strong
5.	<i>Tamattu'</i> type of hajj	Yes/No	No	Yes	Weak
6.	Marwan and Miswar's version	No	N/A	Yes	Strong
7.	First two mosques	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong
8.	Caesar and Chosroe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong
9.	No soul after 100 years	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong
10.	Ghadīr Khum	Yes	Yes	Yes	Good
11.	Last revealed surah (al-Barā)	No	N/A	No	Strong
12.	Greatest daughter	Yes	Yes	No	Good
13.	Surah 'Imran: 28	No	N/A	No	N/A

From the 13 cases relevant to historical analysis, we find Ṭaḥāwī weakens or totally dismisses four. This process of strong content criticism takes place despite the *sanad* strengths of these *aḥādīth*. None of these, however, can be considered 'prophetic *ḥadīth*' strictly speaking; hence, are not *marfū'*.<sup>68</sup> Of the prophetic *ḥadīth* examples analysed in this article, Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī uses historical evidence to choose those other narrations. Ṭaḥāwī's defence of *aḥādīth* even takes place when the *ḥadīth* at hand has questionable *sanad* strength (such as the Ghadīr Khum one). All the cases where

<sup>67</sup> This is based on primarily how the editor of *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt, assesses them.

<sup>68</sup> The *ḥadīth* about the *tamattu'* type of hajj is not an exception to this. The phrase to which Ṭaḥāwī 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.

Ṭaḥāwī dismisses the *ḥadīth* at hand are non-prophetic. When deciding between two choices of non-prophetic *aḥadīth*, Ṭaḥāwī selects the report from a more senior Companion. In fact, what the above table shows is Ṭaḥāwī's hermeneutical flexibility is inversely proportional to the *raf'* nature of the *ḥadīth*.<sup>69</sup> The higher the authority for the speaker of the *ḥadīth*, the more reluctant Ṭaḥāwī is to dismiss the *ḥadīth*. In other words, the moment the *ḥadīth* can be said to be revelatory material, we find Ṭaḥāwī rejecting fewer of those *aḥadīth* based on historical anachronism.

## CONCLUSION

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

One of the reasons why this rule is observed in Ṭaḥāwī'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 Ṭaḥāwī using history in artistic ways to remove observed contradictions in the *ḥadīth* literature. The different *aḥadīth* about which daughter of the Prophet was the most praised is one example of this. Ṭaḥāwī also uses historical reasoning to dismiss certain interpretations and consequentially arrives at new conclusions and possibilities in the field of exegetical studies.

Interestingly, we have not witnessed Ṭaḥāwī dismiss historical data. If certain historical information has been quoted by his interlocutors whom he often cites as a potential clash to a *ḥadīth*, we have only seen Ṭaḥāwī affirm those historical facts and interpret or reject the *ḥadīth*. In other words, Ṭaḥāwī does not reject the history. This might be due to him only exploring serious possibilities of historical contradictions in *ḥadīth* literature and not quoting those contradictions, which were not contradictions in the first place. Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī's works because his underlying

<sup>69</sup> Whether the *ḥadīth* is deemed *marfū'* or *mawq mawqūf* – *ḥadīth* 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, Ṭaḥāwī uses statements such as “hence there is not in this ḥadīth, all praise be to Allah, what would require its impossibility.”<sup>70</sup> One can conclude from such phrases that Ṭaḥāwī is implying, when it totally becomes impossible to find an interpretation to reconcile a ḥadīth with historical knowledge and the historical knowledge makes the ḥadīth be deemed “impossible” (*istiḥāla*), then perhaps at these situations even prophetic ḥadīth that are soundly narrated can be questioned. These phrases leave room to even come up with more fine cut rules from Ṭaḥāwī’s works. What one needs to keep in mind, however, is in the 15 volumes of *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* Ṭaḥāwī is discussing ḥadīth that have reached him through authentic channels.

Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that some of the criteria Ṭaḥāwī highlights when assessing ḥadīth, such as prophetic ḥadīth requiring extra care, such rules should not be compared or applied to *aḥadīth* that one comes across when reading *mawḍū‘āt* literature (books on fabricated *aḥadīth*). The key difference is, in *mawḍū‘āt* literature, each author compiles *aḥadīth* that they believe to be fabricated. In *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, Ṭaḥāwī 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 Ṭaḥāwī’s rules to *aḥadīth* found in *mawḍū‘āt* books and find them non-applicable.

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<sup>70</sup> Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vol. 1, 110.

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