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Abstract: This article examines the historical development, formation, and main stages of the science of hadith interpretation (sharh al-hadith). It analyzes the early interpretive practices of the Companions and the Followers, as well as the contributions of classical scholars and their methodological approaches. The study also defines the concept of hadith interpretation and highlights its role within the broader framework of Islamic sciences. Particular attention is given to the contemporary relevance of this discipline in modern scholarship.

Keywords: Sharh al-hadith; Fiqh al-hadith; Tafsir al-hadith; Sharih (commentator); Gharib; Gharib al-hadith; Hadith studies.

INTRODUCTION

Commentary and interpretation of hadith is an important branch of the science of hadith, as it plays a crucial role in correctly understanding hadiths and uncovering their intended meanings. Although hadith scholars and jurists have long paid attention to its application, the discipline of hadith commentary (sharh al-hadith) was not fully systematized as an independent field in the early period and gradually developed in later generations. The term sharh al-hadith – also known as Ilm Sharh al-Hadith, Ilm Fiqh al-Hadith, or Ilm Tafsir al-Hadith – refers to explaining and interpreting the sayings and actions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in line with Arabic linguistic rules and principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Linguistically, as Ibn Manzur explains, sharh means to open, clarify, and make something clear or understandable.

MAIN BODY

The objective of hadith commentary (sharh al-hadith) is to study issues related to hadith and its foundational principles, understand its organizing methods, and explain approaches and sources of interpretation. It also includes analyzing causes of interpretive errors and its connection with other Islamic legal sciences, particularly hadith sciences¹. It further involves clarifying matters such as muhkam (clear reports), mukhtalif (apparently contradictory reports), nasikh and mansukh (abrogating and abrogated narrations), and the reasons for the occurrence (wurud) of hadiths.

Understanding the fiqh (legal meanings) of hadith is a key branch of hadith sciences and forms both its outcome and the foundation of Sharia. Early scholars gave it great importance, dedicating chapters to it. Imam Al-Ramahurmuzi (d. 360/971) included a chapter titled “The Virtue of Combining Transmission (riwayah) and Comprehension (dirayah)” in “al-Muhaddith al-Fasil bayn al-Rawi wa-l-Wa’i”², and Imam Al-Hakim al-Naysaburi (d. 405/1015) also addressed it in his work³. Though brief, these early discussions laid the groundwork for later studies. Al-Tibi (d. 743/1342) likewise discusses it in “al-Khulasah fi Usul al-Hadith”, adding “gharib al-hadith” and

¹ Bassam Sadafi. Ilm Sharh al-Hadith. Beirut: Dar al-Muqtabas, 2018. – P 30.

² Al-Ramahurmuzi. Al-Muhaddith al-Fasil bayn al-Rawi wa-l-Wa’i. Cairo: Dar al-Zakha’ir, 2016. – P 233-267.

³ Al-Hakim al-Naysaburi. Ma’rifat Ulum al-Hadith wa Kamiyyat Ajnasih. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2003. – P 246.

defining its fiqh as rulings and etiquettes derived from hadith⁴. Haji Khalifa (d. 1657) also describes this science in “Kashf al-Zunun” as a branch of hadith sciences⁵.

This discipline traces back to the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Companions, and the Successors, when hadiths were explained through other hadiths, Companions’ statements, and Successors’ narrations. This shows that the foundations of hadith commentary were established in the earliest period of Islam.

At the same time, the emergence and gradual development of this discipline was closely linked to the process of recording and compiling hadith. In other words, the development of hadith commentary cannot be separated from the history of hadith writing and classification, which began during the time of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and continued until hadiths reached a fully systematic stage.

In the early periods of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), the Companions (sahabah), and the Successors (tabi’un), written records were not yet organized in a chapter-based or systematic form, but served mainly for preservation, memorization, and reference. Later, during the period of the successor generation of the Successors (tabi’ al-tabiin), systematic classification of hadith began, leading some scholars to compile the Prophet’s sayings, while others collected the sayings (qawl) and reports (athar) of the Companions⁶. Thus, the formation of hadith commentary was closely connected not only to understanding hadith texts but also to preserving, organizing, and transmitting them as a scholarly legacy. In this context, works from the second century onward dealing with gharib expressions, mushkil hadiths, and nasikh wa mansukh had a clear influence on this discipline, showing a strong link between these fields.

The 4th/10th century is regarded as the period when hadith commentaries first appeared and began their early development, as scholars laid its foundations and clarified its issues. At the same time, as people moved further from the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), ignorance and innovations increased, and some began misinterpreting Qur’anic verses and hadiths to justify incorrect beliefs, which made the need for hadith interpretation more evident, leading muhaddithun to engage in this field.

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463/1071) stated: “In the earliest periods, during the time of the Companions and the Tabi’un, knowledge was not classified into separate categories or arranged into books and chapters. This was done by later generations, who were then followed by those after them”⁷. These statements show that hadith compilation and classification began toward the end of the Tabi’un period and developed further in later generations. In this stage, hadiths were collected together with the sayings and legal opinions of the Companions and Tabi’un, along with fiqh-related explanations. Thus, fiqh and hadith, as well as riwayat and dirayah, were combined, forming an early basis for hadith commentary works, though not yet as independent books.

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463/1071) also mentioned two methods of compilation: some scholars organized hadiths according to legal rulings and takhrij, while others used the musnad method, gathering narrations of each Companion separately⁸. A clear example of this stage is Al-Muwatta by Imam Malik ibn Anas, which combines fiqh-based structure with hadith, Companions’ and Tabi’un’s reports, and the author’s explanations. It is considered one of the earliest codified works in fiqh and hadith⁹, and its commentaries continued in later generations¹⁰.

⁴ Al-Tibi, Husayn. *al-Khulasah fi Usul al-Hadith*. – Beirut: ‘Alam al-Kutub, 1985. – P 62.

⁵ Haji Khalifa. *Kashf al-Zunun*. – Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-Turath al-Islami, 2021. – Vol. 1. – P 80.

⁶ Al-Wafi, Muhammad. https://www.nidaulhind.com/2016/12/blog-post_69.html.

⁷ Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali. *Sharh Ilal al-Tirmidhi*. – Zarqa: Maktaba al-Manar, 1987. – Vol. 1. – P 341.

⁸ Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi. *Al-Jami’ li Akhlaq al-Rawi wa Adab al-Sami’*. – Riyadh: Maktaba al-Ma’arif, 1983. – Vol. 2. – P 284.

⁹ Al-Fikr al-Sami fi Tarikh al-Fiqh al-Islami / Muhammad Saolibiy al-Fasiy. *Al-Fikr al-Sami fi Tarikh al-Fiqh al-Islami*. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1995. – Vol. 1. – P 449.

In addition, works from the second Hijri century on gharib hadith, contradictory reports, difficult narrations, and nasikh wa mansukh had a strong influence on the development of hadith commentary due to their close connection with it.

The fourth century Hijri (10th century CE) is regarded as the beginning period of hadith commentaries, during which scholars laid its foundations and clarified its main issues. The earliest explanation of hadiths began with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself, as seen in the hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah about the “bankrupt person” (narrated by Imam Muslim), and this practice continued through the Companions and Tabi’un up to later generations. Among the earliest scholars to compile written hadith commentary is Imam al-Khattabi (d. 386/996), who authored “Ma’alim al-Sunan” on Sunan Abu Dawud and a commentary on Sahih al-Bukhari titled “A’lam al-Hadith”. Another important figure is Imam al-Tabari (d. 310/923), whose work “Tahdhib al-Athar wa Tafsil Ma’ani al-Thabit an Rasulillah min al-Akhbar” focused on explaining hadith meanings and was highly valued by later scholars, including Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 852/1448). Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi also praised it, stating: “I have not seen another book similar to it in this field”¹¹, and its detailed scholarly analysis was further described by Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Ahmad ibn Ja’far al-Farghani, noting its depth in chains, meanings, juristic issues, and refutations¹².

Imam al-Khattabi, after writing Ma’alim al-Sunan, also composed a commentary on Sahih al-Bukhari, explaining in his introduction that he aimed to avoid unnecessary repetition while still fulfilling the right of the text by combining concise references to earlier explanations with new insights, and completing what had not been previously covered. After him, hadith commentary expanded significantly and gradually developed into an independent discipline, as scholars increasingly focused on explaining hadiths to ensure correct understanding and to prevent disagreement and misinterpretation. Scholars like Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali note that early scholars prioritized collecting hadith before detailed commentary, and were cautious about mixing prophetic words with extensive external opinions, though some later scholars expanded on rare and linguistic aspects due to emerging misunderstandings and changes in language. Over time, commentaries evolved from brief explanations, as in al-Khattabi’s works, to comprehensive works by scholars such as Ibn al-Mulaqqin, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, and Badr al-Din al-Ayni.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the science of hadith commentary occupies an essential and inseparable position within the Islamic sciences. The explanation of hadiths began with the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and was continued by the Companions and the Tabi’un, while the systematic commentary of hadith collections is commonly associated with Imam al-Khattabi’s explanation of Sunan Abu Dawud in the 4th century Hijri (10th century CE). This discipline is crucial for clarifying rare expressions, resolving complex meanings, and reconciling apparently contradictory narrations. In the modern era, it remains highly relevant, serving as an important source in religious education, academic research, and the formation of a balanced understanding of Islam. Therefore, further study and methodological development of this field continues to be an important scholarly task.

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¹⁰ Al-Wafi, Muhammad. https://www.nidaulhind.com/2016/12/blog-post_69.html.

¹¹ Tarikh Baghdad / Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi. Tarikh Baghdad. – Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2004. – Vol. 2. – P 161.

¹² Siyar Alam al-Nubala / Al-Dhahabi. Siyar Alam al-Nubala. – Beirut: Muassasat al-Risalah, 1983. – Vol. 14. – P 273.

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