

The Notion of Truth in Hadith Sciences

Asma Hilali

Introduction

In this paper, I will demonstrate how the concept of truth in hadith sciences becomes an argument of authority. First, I will propose a definition of the term hadith and a definition of hadith sciences. The second part of this paper is dedicated to the notion of truth and its expressions in hadith sciences. The link between truth and authenticity shows the gradual aspect of the two notions: truth is a fundamental dimension of authenticity. Since this paper deals with the theory of authenticity in hadith sciences, specific theoretical books will be mentioned. Most of them were written between the 10th and 12th centuries.¹ The geographical area covered by these sources extends from the region of Khorassan in northern Iran to Muslim Spain.²

By “the prophetic tradition” (hadith) are meant the words and acts attributed to the prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 e.c) and his companions.³ In Šī‘ī Islam, the term hadith refers to the words attributed to the imām-s. In their technical aspect, the hadith-s include chains of transmission (*sanad/isnād* pl. *asānīd*) and texts (*matn* pl. *mutūn*).⁴

The theoretical framework of authenticity in hadith sciences consists of a system of textual analysis based on the identification of the transmitters within the chain of transmission (*isnād*). It also includes textual (*matn*) criticism. The aim of this system is the reconstruction of the authentic version of each hadith. In the following development, I will answer three essential questions: a) Why is it important for religious scholars to reconstruct the authenticity of a given hadith? b) How are expressions of truth used as a fundamental dimension of authenticity? c) What are the degrees of truth/ authenticity in hadith sciences?

a) Authenticity in Hadith Sciences

Over time, hadith texts grow more and more important in Islam. In the ninth century, hadith is considered as the second theoretical basis of legal norms after the Koran.⁵ Hadith is an authoritative argument in theological controversies and in the dai-

¹ Dickinson, *Development (240/854-327-938)*, 53-80.

² Lucas, *Critics*, 328.

³ Robson, *ḥadīth*, 24-30.

⁴ Librande, *ḥadīth*, 143-151; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*.

⁵ Hallaq, *History*, 33-35.

ly lives of the faithful.⁶ Determining whether hadith is authentic or forged becomes an important issue among the transmitters and the compilers of hadith. The aim of hadith sciences is to find the so-called “authentic hadith” (hadith *ṣaḥīḥ*) by selecting and analyzing texts. The different hadith sciences represent different methods of verification and perpetual correction of hadith texts. The various literary genres in hadith literature are expressions of the multiplicity of hadith sciences. For example, there are books that refer to the various chains of transmission of one hadith (*ṭabṛīğ*), and books of revisions (*taʿqīb* pl. *taʿqībāt*) of the value of specific hadiths. The revisions comment on hadith collections and reexamine their authenticity.

b) Authenticity and Truth

The theory of authenticity is at the center of hadith sciences. Starting in the 10th century, the authors of the first theoretical texts in hadith sciences developed a system of textual criticism that might be called a theory of authenticity. The theory of authenticity is based on a set of codes concerning the transmission of hadith and its knowledge. The authors of the theoretical books often associate authenticity and truth. In hadith sciences, there are many Arabic terms approximately synonymous with “truth”: *ʿilm* (knowledge), *ḥaqq* (truth), *ḥaqīqa* (one truth), *aṣl* (root/origin). However, a single historical reference determines the notion of truth: the prophetic period perceived as pure, idealistic, free of liars.

Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmhurmuzī (d. 971), author of the first systematic work of hadith science, cites the following prophetic hadith: “The truth (al-*ḥaqq*) will be granted to one part of my community until the day of the resurrection”.⁷ The synonymous relationship established between words of authority (*ḥadīth*) and truth (*ḥaqq*) seems to come from a commentary on the same hadith, which announces that the depositaries of “the truth” are the “people of the hadith” (*ahl al-ḥadīth*).⁸ We see here a relationship of part to whole between the terms *truth* and *ḥadīth*. Hadith contains truth; truth designates hadith. But how did hadith theorists imagine the reconstruction of the truth of hadith?

For hadith scientists, the ultimate goal of practical knowledge (*dirāya*) of hadith is the conservation of knowledge: this means authentic hadith and its transmission.⁹ Knowledge of the truth of hadith equals knowledge of its authentic version. In practical terms, this knowledge follows certain rules of writing as well as of oral transmission. To understand these laws, one must consider a phenomenon that is central to the history of hadith: alteration (*tağyīr*). The laws

⁶ The function of hadith as argument is expressed in hadith studies by the notion of legitimation, Donner, *Narratives*, 103-121.

⁷ Al-Rāmhurmuzī, *al-Muḥaddīṭ*, 178.

⁸ Schacht, “*aṣḥāb al-raʿy*”, 713.

⁹ Anawati, “*ʿilm*”, 1161-1162.

of writing and of transmission are a direct consequence of the phenomenon of alteration and of the loss of truth in hadith. The same author presents the laws of writing in the following way:

“Hadith is only specified by writing, then by comparison (*muqābala*) and common study (*mudārasa*), consignment (*ta’abhud*), learning by heart (*tahaffuz*), consultation (*mudākara*), questioning (*su’āl*), examining the transmitters, and profound knowledge (*tafaqquh*) of what they have transmitted.”¹⁰ The transmitter desirous of finding the truth and authenticity of hadith must consider how common revision and correction are. The truth and authenticity of hadith appear as a kind of shared knowledge between the transmitters of hadith and its experts.

This truth also seems to cover a certain absolute value often compared to material value by hadith experts. Abd al-Rahmān al-Rāmhurmuzī cites al-Ḥasan b. Sallām: “This is a hadith like an emerald for it has not been altered”.¹¹ The meaning of alteration is imprecise in this statement. However, the comparison with a precious stone (emerald) underlines the value judgment inherent in the expert’s view of the hadith text. This is confirmed by the following hadith, taken by the same author from al-Awzā’ī: “One would listen to the hadith and expose it to one’s companions as one might expose a false coin. What they [hadith experts] recognized, one accepted; what they denigrated, one rejected.”¹² Metaphors based on emeralds and coins express the scale of values to which hadith scientists subjected their texts, and also the fragility of this scale: *true* becomes *false* as soon as the knowledge of the truth of hadith becomes unsure.

Truth and authenticity in hadith also correspond to a specific period in the history of Islam. Al-Rāmahurmuzī describes the phenomenon of alteration by situating it chronologically in history: “Certainly, the men of the first age disdained writing because of the closeness [of the prophetic era] and because of the short chain of transmission [linking them to the Prophet]; and for this reason, he who commits hadith to writing does not place too much faith in writing it, at the expense of learning and applying it. Nonetheless, now that time has passed [since the time of the Prophet], versions (*turuq*) differ, the names of different transmitters are similar, the plague of forgetfulness prevents tradition from being safeguarded and men are not safe from illusion, the writing down of knowledge (*ilm*) is primordial and more reassuring, and the proof of its necessity is more powerful.”¹³ The first period of Islam is that in which the knowledge of hadith was abundant and no alteration took place. In comparison to this period, the second one, which coincides with a greater distance from the prophetic era, is qualified by the absence of knowledge and by the appearance of alteration in hadith, and thus by the loss of its truth and its authenticity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 385.

¹¹ Al-Rāmahurmuzī, *al-Muḥaddith*, 316.

¹² Ibid., 318.

¹³ Ibid., 386.

According to the theory of authenticity, knowing what is true and authentic in hadith is a return to a primitive kind of knowledge, available in the early days of Islam. Authentic hadith can be reconstructed through the application of the laws of writing: its authenticity is conserved by perpetual correction.

However, beyond a critical system and a complex science, the notion of authenticity also refers to spiritual truth.

The pursuit of truthful versions of hadith can also be associated with a spiritual experience or with sensory impairment: inspiration (*ilbām*) and smell (*al-šamm*). Some subjective aspects can speak with an intuitive knowledge, which is based on a very personal experience. This can be linked to a gift from God (*ilbām*), according to al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 1027), an 11th-century scholar who developed the principal bases of al-Rāmḥurmuzī's theory: "Knowledge of hadith is an inspiration (*ilbām*), [because] if I ask an expert, referring to the flaws of certain hadith: Which source would you give as an argument? He [the expert] will remain so without argument."¹⁴ The same author cites the following dialogue that allegedly took place between a foreigner and the hadith scholar Abū Zur'a al-Rāzī:

“ ‘What is your argument when you refer to the defects in a hadith?’

‘The argument is as follows: if you ask me about my opinion on one [specific] hadith, then I will mention its flaws. If you then ask Ibn Wāra the same thing without confessing to him that you asked me the same question, he will mention the flaws of the same hadith. If you go to see Abū Ḥātim, he will cite the flaws of the hadith in question. By comparing the views of all of us, you will note some differences, but you have to know that each of us has spoken according to his own taste. When you discover that our opinions are similar, you will know the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) of this science.’ After verifying that their versions were similar, the foreigner said: ‘I recognize that science is nothing less than a gift from God.’ ”¹⁵

Thus a new element is added to the notion of truth and authenticity in hadith: mystery. Extra-scientific means of knowing, such as inspiration, belong to the prophetic domain of those who already know authentic hadith before learning it by scientific means.

c) Authenticity as a graduation

I use “the hadith ladder” as a metaphor to refer to the graduated organization of types of hadiths. This organization has two main polarities: the authentic class of hadith (hadith *ṣaḥīḥ*) and hadith that is considered the opposite of authentic, such as falsified hadith (*mudallas*) or forged hadith (*mawḍūʿ*). These are just two examples of types of hadith opposed to authentic hadith; in fact, all other

¹⁴ Al-Naysābūrī, *Maʿrifat ʿulūm al-hadith*, 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

hadiths are false in relation to authentic hadith. The second polarity, at the opposite end of the scale from “authentic” hadith, is composed of a multiplicity of hadiths that are opposed to authentic hadith. However, the idea of a scale or ladder remains present in the theory of authenticity and in particular in authors’ representations of the place of authentic hadith in relation to all types of hadith taken together. The Andalusian hadith scholar Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr al-Qurṭubī (d. 1085) gives us the different classes of hadith. He recounts the following words of Sufyān al-Ṭawrī (d. 778): “I would like to record hadith according to three types: the hadith that I record and consider as law, the hadith of an unknown person that I put down in writing but whose application I suspend because I neither reject it nor accept it as a law, and the hadith of a weak man that I would like to know about but which I do not take any account of.”¹⁶

This citation evokes certain traits that are proper to each of the three main “rungs” in the hadith ladder. The first level is considered to be that of authentic hadith; authenticity and the fact of being put into writing are often closely linked. The three levels are systematically listed in descending order. Hadith, as a text, is subject to hierarchical classification. Over time, it seems to lose some of its attributes such as its authority as a source for rules and its interest as a written text: in short, hadith progressively loses its truth. In the description of the authentic class of hadith, the author expresses a certain consciousness of its excellence. The ladder, the theoretical instrument in the service of transmission, is given a moral foundation that sanctifies the authentic class of hadith, supreme hadith, the prophetic word. Rendered sacred, this word regains its original state and its textual correctness—and thus its truth.

Conclusion

The theory of authenticity is not a simple memory exercise but rather a quest for truth. This quest leads to a system of hadith knowledge; its gauge of authenticity is the knowledge of those who transmit it and their expertise in transmitting it. In hadith science, the notion of truth is synonymous with authentic hadith. Truth refers to a historical period and has a non-scientific, almost sacred dimension. The laws of transmission are paths of research and of the technical reconstruction of the authentic/true version of hadith. Joined with the notion of authenticity, the notion of truth takes on the value of an argument in hadith science. When hadith scholars use the usually vague concept of truth in their rigorous scientific demonstrations, they are addressing not the technical knowledge of a hadith expert but rather his belief. The presence of truth as a rhetorical argument in hadith science demonstrates this science’s adherence to the belief system in which it is anchored, Islamic faith in its first six centuries.

¹⁶ al-Qurṭubī, *Ĝāmi‘ bayān*, 91.

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