



Reconciling Revelation and Reason: Ibn Fūrak's Methodology in Addressing Problematic Ḥadīth within a Metaphysical Framework

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Abstract

The study and authentication of Ḥadīth have been central to the development of Islamic scholarship. Despite the foundational role of Ḥadīth in Islamic law, ethics, and theology, early Muslim scholars undertook the meticulous task of verifying and classifying these traditions. Not all transmitted reports were accepted at face value; rather, many were subjected to rigorous scrutiny due to their apparent contradictions with established principles, weak chains of transmission, or ambiguous content. Among the key figures who made significant contributions to the analysis and reconciliation of problematic Ḥadīth were Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015), Abū Ja'far al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/933), and Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), each of whom developed unique methodological approaches. This article focuses specifically on the methodology of Ibn Fūrak in addressing problematic Ḥadīth and explores how his engagement with metaphysical concepts—particularly those concerning divine attributes, causality, and epistemology—shaped his interpretative strategies. By examining his intellectual framework and hermeneutical techniques, the study reveals the depth and sophistication with which classical scholars approached the preservation and interpretation of the Prophetic tradition. Ibn Fūrak's contributions highlight the interplay between metaphysical reasoning and Ḥadīth interpretation, reflecting broader efforts to harmonize revelation with rational theology in the classical Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Ḥadīth, Islamic scholarship, problematic Ḥadīth, Ibn Fūrak, metaphysics, hermeneutics, revelation, rational theology, divine attributes, epistemology, classical Islamic tradition, Prophetic tradition, methodology

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1. Introduction

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Fūrak al-Anṣārī al-Iṣbahānī, better known as Ibn Fūrak, was a pivotal figure in the early Ash'arī school of theology. He studied under the direct disciples of Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935–936) and alongside prominent Ash'arī scholars such as Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418/1027) and Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). Ibn Fūrak played a crucial role in expanding the Ash'arī madhhab eastward from Baghdad into Khurāsān.¹

¹ Watt, W. Montgomery. "Ibn Fūrak". In P. Bearman (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, (Brill, 2012) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0321

His career was primarily devoted to *kalām* (Scholastic theology), and he engaged in numerous theological debates, which took him from city to city. Facing hostility in Rayy, he accepted an invitation from the elite of Nishapur to settle in their city, where he taught several prominent scholars and mystics, many of whom shared his affiliation with the Shāfiʿī school of law. However, his ardent advocacy of Ashʿarism brought him into conflict with the Karrāmīs, leading to a confrontation before the Ghaznavid court of Sultan Maḥmūd.²

On his return journey to Nishapur in 406/1015, Ibn Fūrak was poisoned, a crime believed to have been perpetrated by his Karrāmī adversaries, according to contemporary chronicles. Ibn Fūrak left behind a series of important works that remain crucial for understanding early Ashʿarism.³

Ibn Fūrak approached problematic Ḥadīth through a lens of theological consistency. For Ibn Fūrak, it was crucial that Ḥadīth align with the rational principles of Islamic theology. When confronted with Ḥadīth that appeared to contradict established theological doctrines, he employed allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) to reconcile them with orthodox beliefs. Ibn Fūrak's method was particularly influential in ensuring that Ḥadīth did not undermine the coherence of Islamic theology, particularly in the areas of God's attributes and actions.

There are several theological works authored by Ibn Fūrak, some of which have survived to the present day. Among these is his commentary on al-Ashʿarī's *al-Lumaʿ*, as well as a collection of definitions of technical terms in *kalām* and legal methodology, titled *al-Ḥudūd fī l-uṣūl*. He also authored the account of al-Ashʿarī's doctrines and additional works that remain in manuscript form. However, Ibn Fūrak is particularly renowned for his book titled *Kitāb Mushkil al-ḥadīth wa bayānihi*.⁴

In this text, Ibn Fūrak addresses the anthropomorphic expressions found in prophetic traditions, offering allegorical interpretations of these passages. It appears that Ibn Fūrak wrote this work in the context of his polemical encounters with the Karrāmiyya, a sect influential in Naysabūr that viewed God as a substrate (*maḥall*) of accidents, leading them to assert that He is a "substance" (*jawhar*) or "body" (*jism*). Consequently, they were widely criticized as anthropomorphists.

Ibn Fūrak's *Mushkil al-ḥadīth* can be understood in light of this specific conflict. The treatise begins with chapters on narrower topics within *kalām*, such as God's oneness and singularity, as well as the meanings of His names and attributes.⁵

² Martin Nguyen, *Exegetes of Nishapur: A Preliminary Survey of Qurʾanic Works by Ibn Ḥabīb, Ibn Fūrak, and ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī*, in *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies*, 2018, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2018), pp. 47-73

³ Ibid.

⁴ Abdel-Haleem, *Early Islamic Theological and Juristic Terminology: "Kitāb al-Ḥudūd fī l-uṣūl,"* by Ibn Fūrak, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol.54, No. 1 (1991), pp. 5-41. It is also titled 'Mushkil al-ḥadīth wa bayānuh' depending on the publisher.

⁵ Watt, W. Montgomery. "Ibn Fūrak". In P. Bearman (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2)*

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Fūrak, also a member of the Shāfiʿī school, studied in Baghdad, spent some time in the Buyid capital of Rayy, and later moved to Naysābūr to teach at a madrasa constructed specifically for him. He remained there until the final years of his life, when he accompanied Abū Ishāq to the Ghaznavid court to debate the Karrāmiyya sect.⁶

2. Theoretical Overview of the Main Concepts and Methodology

This discussion will focus on Ibn Fūrak, who played pivotal roles in the development of the Shāfiʿī/Ashʿarī orthodoxy that would contend with the Ḥanbalī/Sunni orthodoxy for dominance in fifth/eleventh-century Baghdad.

Several of Ibn Fūrak's writings have survived. His principal opponents were the Muʿtazila. His most notable work is his exposition of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī's school of speculative theology, titled *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī* (The Essential Positions of al-Ashʿarī). Additionally, he authored a concise work on uṣūl titled *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd fī al-Uṣūl* (Definitions in Legal Theory) and a book dedicated to interpreting problematic ḥadīth in a way that navigated a middle path between Muʿtazilite rationalism and über-Sunni anthropomorphism.⁷

In *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, Ibn Fūrak employs Prophetic traditions with great care. He admits authentic ḥadīth as evidence in describing God's attributes if they convey the requisite epistemological certainty, rejecting the notion that God is Ḥannān because "no authentic report (*khbar ṣaḥīḥ*) has been established that could reliably attribute this quality to Him."⁸ Ibn Fūrak acknowledges the ambiguity in the Ashʿarī stance on the ability of ḥadīth to abrogate the Qur'an. He notes that al-Ashʿarī required a report to be mutawātir or possess the ruling of tawātur to abrogate the holy book, but he also concedes that abrogation can effectively occur with āḥād ḥadīth when it serves to restrict

English), (Brill, 2012) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0321; Jonathan Brown, The Canonisation of Al-Bukhari and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Hadith Canon, (Brill, 2007), pp.190-1.

⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, "Ibn Fūrak," *EI2*, Abdel-Haleem, Early Islamic Theological and Juristic Terminology: "*Kitāb al-Ḥudūd fī 'l-Uṣūl*," by Ibn Fūrak, in Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol.54, No. 1 (1991), pp. 5-41.

⁷ These works have been published as: Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb al-ḥudūd fī al-uṣūl*, ed. Mohamed al-Sulaymānī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1999); Cf., *Mujarrad maqālāt al-Ashʿarī: exposé de la doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī*, ed. Daniel Gimaret (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1987); Cf. *Bayān muškil al-ahadit des Ibn Furak*, ed. Raimund Köbert, (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1941). Cf. Watt, "Ibn Fūrak," *EI 2*.

⁸ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, 57.

or specify (takhsīs) Qur'anic rulings.⁹

In *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd fī al-Uṣūl*, Ibn Fūrak categorizes reports into *mutawātir* and *āḥād*; the former conveys epistemologically certain apodictic knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*), while *āḥād ḥadīth* are those that do not meet the requirements of *tawātur* and therefore do not yield certain knowledge.¹⁰ Al-Juwaynī records that Ibn Fūrak believed that reports scholars had accepted by consensus were “of assured authenticity (*maḥkūm bi-ṣidqih*),” even if these scholars did not act on their legal implications.¹¹ Ibn Ḥajar reports that Ibn Fūrak held that if an *āḥād ḥadīth* became “*mashhūr*” with well-established transmission, it could yield certain discursive knowledge (*ʿilm naẓarī*).¹²

The subject of the book, in general, represents a part of the sections of “Mushkil al-Ḥadīth” (Problematic Ḥadīth), which is distinguished from “Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth” (Divergent Ḥadīth). It deals with the issue of the Ḥadīth itself when considered in light of limited human reason.

Ibn Fūrak mentioned in the introduction of his book the subject of this book, where he said: “In it, we mention the well-known Ḥadīth narrated from the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, whose apparent meanings suggest anthropomorphism. These reports are of two types: The first type is not restricted to a specific book, as it appears, and the second type refers to two books, which are ‘Kitāb al-Tawḥīd’ (The Book of Monotheism) and ‘Kitāb al-Asmā wa al-Ṣifāt’ (The Book of Names and Attributes), where he mentioned: “Then you asked, when we reached this point in our book, that we consider the compilation of Shaykh Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Khuzaymah, which he called ‘Kitāb al-Tawḥīd’ and we mentioned words he included in his book, which he narrated and collected therein, that were not included in what we had previously dictated and arranged their meanings.” He continued in this way, saying: “Then he asked me again, when we reached this point in our book, that we consider another compilation as well, the collection of Shaykh Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Khuzaymah, which he named ‘Kitāb al-Asmā wa al-Ṣifāt’, so we considered that and found that he had arranged its chapters according to the names and attributes...”¹³

Kitāb Mushkil al-Ḥadīth wa bayānih

The term ‘Mushkil al-Ḥadīth’ refers to Ḥadīth that appear to have problematic or ambiguous meanings, making them difficult to understand or interpret. These Ḥadīth may seem to contradict other authentic Ḥadīth, the Qur’an, or established principles of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. The concept of ‘Mushkil al-Ḥadīth’ has been a subject of interest and study among scholars since the early days of Islam, as they sought to reconcile and explain these seemingly conflicting or unclear reports.

The scholars of Ḥadīth and Islamic jurisprudence have developed various methodologies

⁹ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad maqālat al-Ashʿārī*, 199.

¹⁰ Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb al-ḥudūd fī al-uṣūl*, 150.

¹¹ Al-Juwaynī, *al-Burhān*, 1:585

¹² Ibn Ḥajar, *Nuzhat al-naẓar*, 29-30.

1. Ibn Fūrak, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan. *Kitāb Mushkil al-Ḥadīth wa Bayānih*. Edited by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī. Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1967.

to address 'Mushkil al-Ḥadīth'. These methodologies involve analyzing the linguistic and contextual aspects of the Ḥadīth, comparing them with other Ḥadīth and the Qur'an, and considering the principles of Islamic law and theology. The goal is to resolve the apparent contradictions and provide a coherent understanding of the Ḥadīth that aligns with the broader teachings of Islam.

Ibn Fūrak's approach to 'Mushkil al-Ḥadīth' is rooted in his deep knowledge of the Arabic language, his understanding of the principles of Islamic theology, and his expertise in the science of Ḥadīth. In his book "Mushkil al-Ḥadīth," Ibn Fūrak systematically addresses various problematic Ḥadīth, offering explanations that resolve their ambiguities and reconcile them with other authentic sources. His work is characterized by a methodical and analytical approach, which has made it a valuable resource for scholars studying 'Mushkil al-Ḥadīth'.

Ibn Fūrak's methodology in addressing 'Mushkil al-Ḥadīth' is distinguished by several key principles and approaches, which he consistently applied in his analysis and interpretation of Ḥadīth. These principles include:

1. Linguistic Analysis

Ibn Fūrak placed great emphasis on the linguistic aspects of the Ḥadīth. He meticulously examined the language used in the Ḥadīth, considering the meanings of words, the structure of sentences, and the rhetorical devices employed. By analyzing the linguistic nuances, he aimed to clarify the intended meaning of the Ḥadīth and resolve any apparent ambiguities or contradictions.

2. Contextual Interpretation

Understanding the context in which a Ḥadīth was narrated is crucial for its proper interpretation. Ibn Fūrak paid close attention to the historical, social, and situational context of the Ḥadīth. He examined the circumstances surrounding the narration of each Ḥadīth, considering factors such as the time, place, and audience. This contextual approach allowed him to interpret the Ḥadīth in light of their specific context, thereby resolving potential conflicts with other Ḥadīth or Islamic teachings.

3. Reconciliation of conflicting Ḥadīth

When faced with Ḥadīth that appeared to contradict one another, Ibn Fūrak employed a method of reconciliation. He carefully compared the conflicting Ḥadīth, analyzing their content, authenticity, and context. By doing so, he sought to harmonize the Ḥadīth and provide a coherent understanding that aligns with the broader teachings of Islam. Ibn Fūrak's method of reconciliation often involved interpreting the Ḥadīth in a way that accounted for their different contexts or levels of authenticity, ensuring that they were consistent with Islamic principles.

4. Reference to the Qur'an and other reliable sources

Ibn Fūrak consistently referred to the Qur'an and other reliable sources of Islamic knowledge when interpreting Ḥadīth. He viewed the Qur'an as the ultimate authority, and he used it as a criterion for evaluating the authenticity and interpretation of Ḥadīth. Additionally, he considered the consensus of the scholars (ijmā') and the established principles of Islamic jurisprudence as essential guides

in his analysis. By aligning his interpretations with these sources, Ibn Fūrak ensured that his conclusions were grounded in the broader framework of Islamic teachings. In sum, the book draws extensively from the Qur'an and Ḥadīth, using these primary sources to support Ibn Fūrak's arguments and interpretations. He also cites the works of earlier scholars, including al-Ash'arī, to bolster his theological positions. Ibn Fūrak utilized a wide range of secondary sources, including commentaries, historical accounts, and other theological texts. These sources provided additional context and support for his explanations of problematic Ḥadīth.

5. Attention to Theological implications

Ibn Fūrak was deeply aware of the theological implications of his interpretations. He approached the Ḥadīth with a keen understanding of Islamic theology, ensuring that his explanations were consistent with the doctrinal beliefs of Islam. This theological awareness guided his interpretation of Ḥadīth, particularly when dealing with issues related to the attributes of God, the nature of prophethood, and other fundamental aspects of Islamic belief.

Ibn Fūrak's methodology in 'Mushkil al-Ḥadīth' reflects his comprehensive knowledge of Islamic sciences, his analytical approach, and his commitment to resolving ambiguities in a manner that upholds the integrity of Islamic teachings. His work has had a significant impact on the field of Ḥadīth studies, providing scholars with valuable insights into how to approach and resolve problematic Ḥadīth. Despite his contributions, Ibn Fūrak faced criticism from some contemporaries and later scholars who disagreed with his interpretations. These criticisms often centered on his rationalist approach and his positions on divine attributes.

Analysis and Critique of His Methodology

Ibn Fūrak's methodology is characterized by a strong emphasis on rational analysis, which he used to interpret and explain problematic Ḥadīth. This approach involved critically examining the text of the Ḥadīth, its chain of transmission, and its contextual background. His analyses were grounded in the theological framework of the Ash'arite creed, which guided his interpretations and conclusions. This framework prioritized the use of reason and logical consistency in understanding religious texts. One of the key strengths of Ibn Fūrak's methodology is its effectiveness in resolving apparent contradictions in Ḥadīth. By providing clear and rational explanations, he helped to clarify and reconcile difficult texts. His comprehensive approach, which integrated various sources and perspectives, contributed to the depth and reliability of his interpretations. This approach made his work a valuable resource for scholars seeking to understand and explain problematic Ḥadīth.

Critics argue that Ibn Fūrak's methodology sometimes placed too much emphasis on rational analysis, at the expense of traditional interpretations. This over-reliance on rationalism was seen by some as undermining the authority of established religious texts. Some of his positions, particularly regarding divine attributes, were controversial and sparked debates among his contemporaries and later scholars. These debates often centered on the appropriateness and limits of rational interpretation in theology.

Evaluation of His Beliefs and Doctrines

Core Beliefs

1. Divine Attributes:

Ibn Fūrak upheld the Ashʿarite view that divine attributes are eternal and uncreated. He argued that these attributes should be understood metaphorically, rather than literally, to avoid anthropomorphism.

2. The Role of Reason:

He believed in the significant role of reason in understanding and interpreting religious texts. This belief was a cornerstone of his theological approach and influenced his interpretations of Ḥadīth and other texts.

He began his book with a section outlining the subject of his book and clarifying the purpose of his discussions. He mentioned that there are two groups concerning Ḥadīth: the first group focuses on merely transmitting and narrating Ḥadīth, distinguishing between what is authentic and what is weak; the second group is concerned with critical analysis and understanding, with a particular emphasis on the content of the Ḥadīth. Among them are the Ashʿarites in his view. He then discussed the clear and ambiguous verses in the Qurʾan and explained the origin of the distortion by opposing sects regarding his perspective on Ḥadīth. He concluded by saying: "The reports of the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, follow this course and are revealed according to this guidance. Among them are the clear words that are self-explanatory, and among them are those that rely on further explanation, depending on the custom of the Arabs in their speech."¹⁴

He then began the main part of his book by presenting a report that necessitates interpretation and appears to be figurative." He then lists a Ḥadīth related to this, which includes some of its other chains of transmission (*asānīd*), or he may simply attribute it to the Prophet, peace be upon him. After mentioning the various chains, he starts interpreting the report, introducing it with the phrase: "Explanation of the interpretation." Sometimes, he does not provide an introduction to the interpretation but goes directly from mentioning the Ḥadīth to explaining it.¹⁵

If a Ḥadīth has come with other supporting reports that include additional attributes requiring interpretation according to him, he explains this by saying: "Mentioning another report in a similar context." For example, in the Ḥadīth "My Lord came to me in the most beautiful form," he discusses the attributes of form and appearance, having already dedicated a section to the form in the previous chapter. He addresses matters related to form and appearance and discusses some of the chains of the earlier Ḥadīths and their interpretations. For instance, he states: 'As for the Ḥadīths of Ibn Abbas, some of them contain additional words that necessitate interpretation and analysis.'¹⁶

If the Ḥadīth is one that has been discussed by others before him and he has encountered their statements on the matter, he affirms this. His primary reliance in this regard is on Muḥammad b. Shujāʿ al-Thaljī. An example of this is his statement after mentioning the previously cited Ḥadīth: 'Muḥammad b. Shujāʿ al-Thaljī said in the critique of this Ḥadīth:

¹⁴ Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb Mushkil al-ḥadīth wa bāyānihi*, 42-43

¹⁵ Ibid: 2-3

¹⁶ Ibid: 78

'This Ḥadīth is inauthentic (*ḍa'if*).'¹⁷

He sometimes mentions certain verses of the Qur'an that require interpretation if they relate to the subject of the Ḥadīth he is discussing. For example, he says: "If someone says: If you interpret the report of descent as you have mentioned, how do you interpret the verse: So Allah came to their building from the foundations (*fa ata Allahu bunyānahum min al-qawā'id*)?" and he then mentions other verses.¹⁸

He resorts to metaphorical interpretation of the Ḥadīth and chooses what aligns with his school of thought regarding the meanings of a single word, based on what is possible in the Arabic language, even if from a distant perspective. For example, in interpreting the attribute of 'the palm,' (*kaf*) he said: "The Arabs have used the words hand, finger, and palm to mean blessing, which is quite common in the language." He then provides examples from the Arabic language. He generally does not rely on language books or similar sources for this, but attributes it directly to the Arabic language.

He also supports his interpretations of the meanings of words with some poetic verses. For instance, he cites a verse to demonstrate that one of the meanings of 'palm' is power, using the poet's line: 'Be patient, for matters are controlled by the hand of the Lord.'¹⁹

It is agreed that Ibn Fūrak was a thinker of the Ash'arī school and one of its prominent scholars. In his book, he sought to interpret the texts according to his school of thought and explained this by saying: "Know that the Prophet, peace be upon him, addressed us according to the language of the Arabs. Therefore, when his speech is presented, it should be understood according to the rules of Arabic. If it can be interpreted in two ways, one of which aligns with the language and a valid interpretation that does not lead to anthropomorphism or result in absurdities in the description of Allah, the Most High, and if the second interpretation involves anthropomorphism, characterization, and representation, then it is preferable to adopt the interpretation that does not lead to describing Allah, the Most High, with limbs and instruments."²⁰

Furthermore, he does not regard the reports of individual narrators (*akhbār al-aḥād*) as providing certainty but only probable evidence. He explicitly stated this. "According to the majority of scholars and Ḥadīth experts, such reports do provide certainty, as the Prophet sent emissaries to kings and regions to spread the message of Islam, and these were often individual reports. The establishment of Ramadan and Hajj is confirmed by the sighting of a single individual, as is well known."²¹

If the Ḥadīth is narrated by someone known for transmitting Isrā'īliyāt (Israelite traditions), he rejects it for this reason, as in his statement about some narrations: 'Reliance in such cases is on Ka'b or Wahb, from the reports of the Torah, and nothing of that is reliable.'²²

Additionally, a Ḥadīth might be rejected due to the weakness of its narrator if there is criticism from previous scholars, even if this is not the main criterion for those who scrutinize Ḥadīth. He relied on narrators of Ḥadīth who are considered as inauthentic, such as, Muḥammad b. Shujā' al-Thaljī, 'Ikrima, the freed slave of Ibn 'Abbās, and Ḥammād b. Salama. He said: "Thaljī stated that this Ḥadīth is inauthentic, Ḥammād

¹⁷ Ibid:7

¹⁸ Ibid: 207

¹⁹ Ibid: 79

²⁰ Ibid: 302

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

reported it from Thābit, and no one else transmitted it from him among his companions.”²³

He also refers to reports from the Companions or the early generations that require interpretation according to his view. For instance, he narrated a report from Muḥammad b. Kab al-Qurazī and then mentioned the criticism of this narration. He also commented on the narrators from Muḥammad b. Kaʿb. His focus is on matters related to the attributes of Allah. However, he might deviate from this approach, as in the Ḥadīth: "The Throne shook due to the death of Saʿd b. Muʿāḍ." He mentioned his interpretation and then said: "Know that this report does not pertain to the attributes of Allah, the Most High. However, it is a problematic expression in the category of reports that we include in the interpretation and explanation of ambiguous Ḥadīth.”²⁴

In the introduction, he also clarifies his view known as *‘āḥād’* Ḥadīth. He states: "As for those that are *‘āḥād’* Ḥadīth, where the evidence is supported by the reliability of the transmitters, the integrity of the narrators, and the continuity of their transmission, although such reports do not necessitate certainty and absolute knowledge, they do imply a high degree of probability and allow for a permissible judgment. Thus, it is valid to consider them as possible and plausible, rather than impossible and precluded.”²⁵

Regarding conflicts, he states: "As for the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him: ‘Allah created Adam in His image,’ the interpreters of Ḥadīth have provided many interpretations, which we will mention, and we will add what we have found in our own interpretation, which aligns with theirs...”²⁶

Sometimes, he mentions the previous interpreters of the Ḥadīth, discussing their views critically. He states: "Know that some of our predecessors who interpreted this Ḥadīth deviated from the correct path and followed a mistaken and impossible route." At times, he specifies the names of those who previously interpreted the Ḥadīth, and at other times, he does not mention their names, leaving them ambiguous.²⁷

He focuses on selecting interpretations that align with his school of thought regarding the meanings of a single word, based on what is possible in the Arabic language, even from distant perspectives. For example, he says regarding the meaning of ‘hand’ (*yad*): "Know that in the language, ‘hand’ is used to mean various things, including: a limb, ownership, and blessing... It may also be applied to signify power, strength, and ability...”²⁸

He also states: "Know that describing Allah, the Almighty, as laughing, according to what has been reported in the Ḥadīth, is permissible in general. However, to interpret this as if laughing is a description like any other attribute is incorrect. We have previously explained the interpretations of the Ḥadīths that mention laughter, and we have interpreted and clarified it, explaining its meaning and showing that the original sense of ‘laughter’ in the language is appearance, manifestation, and elucidation in a specific context...”²⁹

He sometimes refers to certain verses that need interpretation if they relate to a specific Ḥadīth. After mentioning the authentic Ḥadīth: "Maintaining family ties increases

²³ Ibid: 247

²⁴ Ibid:283

²⁵ Ibid:22

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid:24

²⁸ Ibid:34

²⁹ Ibid:137

lifespan” and its interpretation, he states: “If someone asks, what do you say about the verse: ‘Allah erases what He wills and confirms what He wills, and with Him is the Mother of the Book’?,³⁰ Some scholars have interpreted this in various ways: Some said...” and then he lists them.³¹

He often presents an objection and then responds to it, a common method in the books of theologians, which is evident in most parts of the book. For example, he says: “How is the enjoyment of looking at His Face, and what is the specific aspect of the attribute that is visible? If it is visible but not the essence, what is the benefit of specifying the vision of it?” The answer to this is that the attribute of a thing might be mentioned to refer to its broader meaning.³²

He sometimes quotes other scholars without attributing the statements to them, which occurs in many places, such as when he says: “A certain scholar said: The meaning of increasing lifespan is the removal of afflictions from them...” He may also attribute quotes to their sources in some instances, as in: “Sufyān said: I read in the work of Shurayḥ...”³³ He then dedicates a section at the end of the book to respond to those who say that the reports mentioned in his book should not be occupied with interpretation, analysis, or explanation of their meanings.

He interprets divine attributes including hand, foot, finger, palm, hand, joy, amazement, laughter, and modesty.³⁴

For example, in the Ḥadīth from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī where the Prophet, peace be upon him, said:

“One of you gives a date in charity from the good (pure) things, and Allah only accepts what is good, Allah places it in His Hand and nourishes it...” Ibn Fūrak says regarding the meaning of ‘Hand’: “Know that the meaning of ‘Hand’ here refers to sovereignty and authority...”³⁵

He also says about ‘finger’: “Know that the word ‘finger’ is used in the language with the meanings we have mentioned. It can also refer to a limb, not exclusively to it, and it is permissible to use it in the ways we have described. We have established the argument and clarified the proof against the impossibility of describing Allah, the Almighty, with limbs and instruments and tools, so it is not permissible to interpret that as referring to a limb due to its impossibility in describing the attributes of Allah, the Most High. Therefore, it must be understood in one of the meanings we have mentioned, as they convey the correct meaning and do not imply the how or anthropomorphism that Allah, the Almighty, is above.”³⁶

Conclusion

The article focuses on the intellectual legacy of Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015), a prominent scholar of the early Ash‘arī school, and his approach to dealing with problematic Ḥadīth in Islamic scholarship. Ibn Fūrak’s methodology, deeply rooted in Ash‘arī theology, was

³⁰ Qur’an:13:39

³¹ Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb Mushkil al-ḥadīth wa bāyānihi*, 150

³² Ibid:357

³³ Ibid:306

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid:149

³⁶ Ibid:117

central to reconciling Ḥadīth that appeared to conflict with established theological doctrines or principles. His approach emphasized rational analysis, allegorical interpretation (ta'wīl), and theological consistency, particularly in understanding God's attributes.

One of Ibn Fūrak's significant contributions was his book *Kitāb Mushkil al-Ḥadīth wa Bayānih*, where he explored the interpretation of problematic Ḥadīth, especially those with anthropomorphic language that could suggest a corporeal understanding of God. His primary concern was to ensure that such Ḥadīth did not undermine Islamic theological coherence. To achieve this, Ibn Fūrak applied his expertise in both the science of Ḥadīth and theology, offering metaphorical explanations to safeguard the transcendence of God's attributes. He aimed to interpret these Ḥadīth in a way that preserved the Islamic understanding of monotheism (tawḥīd) while avoiding anthropomorphism, which was a key concern in his polemics against sects like the Karrāmiyya.

Ibn Fūrak's method is characterized by several key principles. Firstly, he placed great importance on linguistic analysis, meticulously examining the language of Ḥadīth to uncover the intended meaning. He focused on the Arabic language's rhetorical and syntactical structures, aiming to clarify ambiguities that might lead to theological confusion. Secondly, he emphasized the context in which Ḥadīth were narrated, analyzing the social, historical, and situational factors surrounding each tradition. This contextual approach allowed him to resolve apparent contradictions and harmonize problematic reports with other Islamic teachings.

A key part of Ibn Fūrak's methodology was his focus on reconciling conflicting Ḥadīth. When faced with traditions that seemed to contradict each other or established principles, he employed a method of reconciliation that involved analyzing the content, authenticity, and context of the reports. He aimed to ensure that all Ḥadīth interpretations aligned with the broader Islamic theological framework, particularly concerning the divine attributes.

Moreover, Ibn Fūrak's use of rational analysis within an Ash'arī framework shaped his interpretation of Ḥadīth. He did not reject Ḥadīth based solely on their content; instead, he sought to interpret them in a way that was consistent with Islamic reason and orthodoxy. His approach was rooted in the belief that reason could and should be used to understand religious texts, a hallmark of Ash'arī theological thought. This rationalist approach, while criticized by some contemporaries, was essential to his method of addressing problematic Ḥadīth.

Despite the strengths of his approach—particularly his success in resolving contradictions and providing a systematic framework for interpreting ambiguous reports—Ibn Fūrak's methodology also faced criticisms. Some scholars argued that his reliance on rationalism sometimes came at the expense of traditional interpretations. His positions on divine attributes, which leaned toward metaphorical explanations, sparked debates within the scholarly community, especially among those who advocated a more literal understanding of Ḥadīth.

In conclusion, Ibn Fūrak's contribution to the study of problematic Ḥadīth is significant for its depth, rigor, and systematic approach. His use of rational analysis, allegorical interpretation, and contextual examination provided a comprehensive framework for understanding Ḥadīth that appeared contradictory or ambiguous. While his approach was controversial, particularly in its rationalist inclinations, it left an indelible mark on Islamic scholarship, particularly in the fields of Ḥadīth studies and theology. His works remain influential for scholars seeking to navigate the complexities of Islamic traditions while maintaining theological consistency.

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