239151 - The relationship between prophetic hadith and scientific reality

the question

Although I dont yet know a hadith which clearly contradicts with reality but I am saying by way of knowledge can reality abrogate hadith? ie if a hadith contradicts reality or established scientific facts can we reject it.As(as far as I know) a very strong chain narration hadith can abrogate another (when reconcilation is not possible) contradictory hadith although sahee but not as strong as other. Can we call such a person disbeliever if he rejects hadith saying it contradicts reality or scientific facts(after he is unable to reconcile it)
Even if there may be no contradiction with reality or real facts but still I want its very much detailed answer (much important)
What are the comments of great scholars on this issue.
Inshallah As I may publish a book in which I may quote the answer you will provide giving your website's reference.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Scientific reality is something created by Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, and the source of the Qur’an and Sunnah is Allah, may He be glorified. Whatever comes from Allah, may He be glorified – whether it is revelation or creation – cannot contradict one another, because here you are talking about Allah, may He be glorified, to Whom belongs utmost perfection and Whose knowledge encompasses all things, both major and minor. So He is far above there being any contradiction between what He creates and what He reveals, for they both come from the same source. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Do they not then consider the Qur’an carefully? Had it been from other than Allah, they would

surely have found therein many contradictions”

[an-Nisa’ 4:82].

Once you understand this idea, you will realise that whatever contradiction we think there is – as it appears to be – between scientific reality and prophetic hadith is due to errors in thinking, and the researcher must strive to examine and understand the issue in the light of the basic principle referred to above, the principle which confirms the harmony between reason (including empirical science) and revelation. Then he will realise that there was some mistake which led to what he thought was a contradiction. Otherwise, there is in fact agreement and harmony between reason and revelation, as ar-Raaghib al-Asfahaani (may Allah have mercy on him) said with regard to reason and Islamic teachings: They support one another; rather they are one and the same. End quote from Tafseel an-Nash’atayn (p. 74).

This means that the outcomes of examining the issues in an attempt to resolve these apparent contradictions may lead to many things, of which we will mention a few, or the most important:

-1-

Reaching a conclusion that this particular hadith which is attributed to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) has a flawed chain of narrators, and the supposed soundness of the hadith has no basis. The weakness of the hadith will become apparent when we re-examine the hadith and study the issue in order to resolve the contradiction.

In this situation, scientific reality would become a means that may help us to find out about the problem with the chain of narrators. Were it not for this issue (of apparent contradiction) then the critic would have accepted the soundness of the hadith at face value (because it appeared to him to be sound), without examining it fully in order to find the subtle problem with the hadith.

Ibn Abi’l-Haatim ar-Raazi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The soundness of the hadith should be judged on the basis of the soundness of those who narrated it, and the text of the hadith must be of the calibre that is fit to be the words of the Prophet

(blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

End quote from al-Jarh wa't-Ta'deel (1/351)

Ibn al-Jawzi also said:

Do you not see that if a group of trustworthy people all told us together that a camel entered the eye of a needle, the fact that they are all trustworthy is of no use to us or to what they are reporting, and it has no impact on their report, because they are reporting that something impossible happened. So with regard to any report that is contrary to reason or contradicts basic principles, you must realise that it is fabricated, so do not put any effort into finding a reason to justify and accept it.

End quote from al-Mawdoo'aat (1/106).

Imam al-'Iraqi (may Allah have mercy on him) said something similar:

One of the things which prove that a hadith is fabricated is when it is contrary to reality.

End quote. Quoted by Ibn Hajar in al-Qawl al-Musaddad (p. 9)

An example of that is the marfoo' hadith attributed to Abu Hurayrah: "Whoever narrates a hadith and sneezes when narrating it, then it is true."

Narrated by Abu Ya'la in al-Musnad (11/234) with an isnaad that was classed as hasan by some scholars, such as an-Nawawi in al-Adhkaar (p. 275) and as-Suyooti in ad-Durar al-Muntathirah fi'l-Ahaadeeth al-Mushtahirah (p. 183).

But some later scholars of hadith said: This is a false hadith, even if its chain of narrators was as beautiful as the sun. End quote. Quoted by az-Zarkashi in al-La'aali al-Manthoorah (p. 211).

Ibn al-Qayyim said:

Even though some scholars classed its chain of narrators as saheeh, real life testifies that it is a

fabrication, because we see people sneezing when lying is taking place. If one hundred thousand men sneezed when a hadith is narrated from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) it could not be deemed sound because of that sneezing, and if they sneezed when false testimony is being given it could not be accepted. End quote.

Look at how Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) used the fact that the hadith is contrary to real life to prove that it is false.

However, the isnaad of this hadith is neither saheeh nor hasan; rather it is da'eef jiddan (very weak). Therefore Abu Haatim ar-Raazi said: This hadith is a lie – as it says in al-'Ilal (3/116).

For more discussion concerning the problems with this hadith, please see al-Fawaa'id al-Majmoo'ah fi'l-Ahaadeeth al-Mawdoo'ah by ash-Shawkaani, and the comment by al-'Allaamah al-Mu'allimi thereon (p. 224). See also: Silsilat al-Ahaadeeth ad-Da'eefah by al-Albaani (136).

But this way of examining hadith – as you see – is to be carried out within the framework of the science of hadith and within the general guidelines of that field. Also there should be a condition that the hadith should clearly contradict reality. But examination of the hadith should not be done in the manner of those who criticise and try to undermine the Sunnah, and hasten to reject every hadith even when it is not contrary to reality and science, just because it is contrary to their whims and desires, which have no clear guidelines or framework; rather they do that without referring to the general guidelines on examination of hadith to which the scholars of hadith usually refer.

Here we should point out an important fact, which is of great significance in this regard and was highlighted by Imam ash-Shaafa'i (may Allah have mercy on him), which is that this way of examining the hadith, through which we may establish that it is something that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) could not have said, can only be applied to very few hadiths.

Imam ash-Shaafa'i (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

There should not be any method of confirming whether a hadith is true or false other than

examining whether a narrator is trustworthy or a liar, except in the case of a very few specific hadiths, which is when we can tell whether the hadith is true or false on the basis that the narrator narrated something that cannot possibly be true, or because it is contradicted by another hadith that is narrated by someone who is more knowledgeable and there is more evidence that he is truthful. End quote from ar-Risaalah (p. 399).

-2-

The researcher may realise that what he thought was a scientific fact in reality is not; rather science may reach a conclusion later on that is in harmony with the prophetic hadith, in which case there will be no basis for the claim of contradiction.

An example of that is when some people rejected the hadith of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) about the fly, in which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “If a fly falls into the drink of one of you, let him immerse it then take it out, for on one of its wings is a disease and on the other is a cure.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari in his Saheeh (3320).

Al-Khattaabi said:

Some people of bad character criticised this hadith and said: How can that be so? How can both the disease and the cure be on the two wings of the fly? How could the fly know about that itself, so that it could put the diseased wing in first and try to avoid dipping the healing wing, and what is the fly’s aim in doing that? End quote from Ma‘aalim as-Sunan (4/259)

This objection to the hadith is hastening to reject it. But it became possible to respond to this criticism, as al-Mu‘allimi said:

How could Abu Rayyah and his ilk deny the fact that Allah, may He be exalted, could have told His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) about a fact that science has not yet discovered?

End quote from al-Anwaar al-Kaashifah (p. 221).

Some modern research has confirmed that the hadith of the fly actually has scientific proof, and that flies indeed carry disease in the form of harmful bacteria and they carry the remedy in the form of antibacterial agents. Among the strongest scientific evidence that has been established concerning this matter is research undertaken by Prof Dr Mustafa Ibraaheem Hasan, a professor in medical entomology and the director of the Centre for the Research and Study of Disease-Transmitting Insects, and published under the heading ad-Daa' wa'd-Dawa' fi Janaahay adh-Dhubaab (Disease and Remedy on the Wings of the Fly).

Therefore it is not permissible for the researcher to be hasty in claiming that he knows scientific facts – whether that is with regard to the alleged harm of immersing the fly in water, or any other issues – before he verifies the matter by means of proper scientific experiments.

It should be known that hastening to reject hadith is a very serious problem that usually leads to wrong conclusions. The hadith of the fly offers the greatest example to learn from in this regard.

A similar case is the hadith about the splitting of the moon. The scholars of hadith do not see any problem with believing in the incident of the splitting of the moon, and they have confirmed the soundness of many reports that were narrated concerning this incident.

One of the most significant of those reports is that which was narrated in as-Saheehayn from 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (may Allah be pleased with him) who said: The moon was split in half at the time of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Bear witness."

This hadith was narrated by Imam al-Bukhaari in his Saheeh (no. 3636) and by Muslim in his Saheeh (2800). The hasty attitude on the part of some researchers, when they hasten to reject this hadith on the basis that it contradicts astronomical facts, is similar to the mistake mentioned above. That is because space science does not deny that the moon was split, and the fact that science does not confirm that it took place does not mean that it did not happen. Therefore it is essential to subject the matter to proper scientific research, before deciding to interpret the hadith in a manner other than its apparent meaning, let alone rejecting it.

-3-

In many cases we realise that the apparent contradiction is caused by misunderstanding of the prophetic hadith, and that correct and precise interpretation is the way to resolve what appears to be contradictory.

One example is the misinterpretation of the hadith, “There is no contagion, no superstitious belief in bird omens, no haamah [This refers to a Jaahili Arab tradition described variously as: a worm which infests the grave of a murder victim until he is avenged; an owl; or the bones of a dead person turned into a bird that could fly] and no Safar [the month of Safar was regarded as “unlucky” during the Jaahiliyyah]. And flee from the leper as you would flee from a lion.” Narrated by Muslim (5707) and Muslim (2220).

Some who tried to undermine the Sunnah think that this hadith suggests that there is no such thing as contagion, i.e., the natural cause by means of which disease is transmitted from a sick individual to a healthy one, therefore they denied and rejected the report.

But this interpretation of the hadith is wrong, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) forbade one who is healthy to mix with one who is sick, and he issued instructions that one who is infected with plague is to be quarantined. All of that is proven in well-known sound hadith. In fact, in the same hadith in which it says “There is no contagion,” it also says: “Flee from the leper.” And there cannot be a contradiction within a single hadith.

The contagion that is denied in this hadith is that which was widely believed among ignorant people, which was connected to some animals and mythical beings that were believed to reside in the sick person, then leave him and go to reside in the body of a healthy person, thus causing him to fall sick.

Abu ‘Ubayd al-Qaasim ibn Salaam (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Safar [explained above as referring to a month that was regarded as unlucky] may refer to a creature that resides in the stomach. Abu ‘Ubaydah said: I heard Yoonus asking Ru’bah ibn al-

‘Ajjaaj about safar and he said: It is a snake in the stomach that affects livestock and people, and it is more contagious than scabies according to the Arabs.

Abu ‘Ubayd said: The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) confirmed that it is not contagious. It was said that it causes pain to man and hurts him when he becomes hungry.

End quote from Ghareeb al-Hadith, 1/25

We have discussed this hadith in more detail in the answer to question no. 45694.

Once the scientific facts are proven, and the chain of narrators of the hadith is proven to be sound, then the hadith must be understood in a manner that does not contradict scientific facts, even if that is by means of some kind of interpretation, on condition that the language allows that manner of interpretation.

These, in brief, are some ways that may help us to solve the apparent contradiction between science or reality on the one hand, and the hadith on the other hand, through which we may learn that the matter is not subject to one absolute rule; rather the matter is subject to discussion and examination, and weighing up the matter on the basis of knowledge and fairness. Whoever follows that approach (in trying to solve the apparent contradiction) will be doing the right thing and being fair-minded, and he should not be accused of committing an act of disbelief or innovation. As for the one who rejects the hadith without following a fair and impartial methodology, we have already discussed the ruling on such a person in the answer to question no. 115125.

For more information, you may refer to a doctoral thesis entitled Athar al-‘Ilm at-Tajreebi fi’l-Kashf ‘an Naqd al-Hadeeth an-Nabawi by Dr Jameel Abu Saarah, which is printed by Markaz Nama’. This has been very useful to us in preparing most of the ideas in the answer given above.

And Allah knows best.