

Reconsidering Hadith al-Iftiraq

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Hadith al-Iftiraq is a famous hadith attributed to Prophet Muhammad (s) in many Shi'i and Sunni hadith collections, as well as in heresiographical sources. Among many books written by contemporary heresiographers, few have failed to mention this hadith in their writings. Many Shi'i and Sunni traditionists have collected the traditions that deal with the future of the Muslim ummah under such titles as the hadith of *fitan* (tribulations), *iftiraq al-ummah* (division of ummah), or *ittiba' sunan man mada* (lit., following the ways of those who have passed). However, it seems that none of the above traditions have been more welcomed by heresiographers and apologists than the *hadith iftiraq al-ummah*. This article will analyze this hadith and its different versions and various interpretations, especially the identity of the only sect that, according to the hadith, will be saved in the Hereafter.

Keywords: hadith, heresiography, sect, sectarianism.

Introduction

Although Hadith al-Iftiraq has been cited by a great number of Muslim scholars, it has not been cited by some famous heresiographers such as Nawbakhti and al-Ash'ari; some scholars, such as Ibn Hazm, even held

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that the hadith was unreliable (Ibn Hazm 1416 AH, 3:293). However, according to some other scholars, particularly considering the frequency of its quotation in various sources, the hadith is not only *mashhur* (well-known) but also *mutawatir* (frequently narrated) (Ibn Tawus 1400AH, 1:200; 2:381-562). Although frequent quotation of this hadith in various works cannot be counted as a strong reason for its authenticity, its effect has made some to consider it reliable. Therefore, the efforts of many who have studied this hadith have been mainly focused on justification, explanation, and examination of its content and theological impacts.¹ Reconsidering this hadith seems quite necessary, as it has been used to promote sectarianism and claim a monopoly on salvation.

1. Differences in Reports

This hadith has been reported with different wordings. Although some of these differences are insignificant, some others, particularly those related to the identity of the saved sect, are clearly contradictory.

Overall, diverse reports and interpretations of this hadith can be examined in three parts: the opening part, the middle part, and final part.

A. Differences in the Opening and Middle Parts of the Hadith

Some reports only deal with the classification of sects and their number in the past nations (Jews, Christians, and also Zoroastrians as cited in one tradition), as well as Muslims, and there is no mention of the salvation or destruction of a particular group or groups. As compared to other traditions, these traditions are fewer in number. At the end of the chain of narrators of these traditions in Sunni sources, we see the name of Abu Hurayra mostly. Notably, in some reports, the numbers start from seventy, instead of seventy-one; some of them use the word *milla*

1. See, for example, Shatibi (1418 AH, 459 ff.), al-Shaykh al-Tusi (1366 Sh, 127), and Hakimi (1410 AH, 5 ff.). For a study of the hadith's Sunni chains of narrators, see Ibn Abi 'Asim (1419 AH, 1:75-81), Ajluni (1352 AH, 169-70), and Haythami (1402 AH, 7:511-16).

(nation) instead of *firqa* (sect) and Israelites instead of the Jews or *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book); and, in some cases, there is no mention of Christians. Moreover, rather than citing the number of Muslim sects, some reports use such phrases as “more than that in my nation” and/or “my nation similar to Israelites and Christians.”¹ Another report considers the time of the formation of these sects during apocalypse (MMI 1428 AH, 1:39). Furthermore, some other reports point out the division of the Muslim nation into two-fold, three-fold, or even four-fold categories (Majlisi 1403 AH, 28:10-16, 17, 22; Shatibi 1418 AH, 506).

In another category, which constitutes a large part of the reports of this hadith, not only is the idea of the division of the followers of the previous religions and of Islam cited but it is mentioned that only some of these sects will be saved. These reports convey that from among seventy-one Jewish sects, seventy-two Christian sects, and seventy-three Muslim sects, all—except for one sect—are misguided and destined to hell. Based on another tradition, these misguided sects are *ahl al-ahwa'* (people of desires) (Ibn Abi 'Asim 1419 AH, 1:79). Although there are different interpretations for these traditions, they all share the idea that only some sects will be saved, and the others are misguided and doomed to hell.² Another tradition, however, considers three sects, from among seventy-three sects, to be salvable (Ibn Abi 'Asim 1419 AH, 1:79; Shatibi 1418 AH, 506).

On the other extreme, according to a hadith, all the seventy-three Muslim sects—except for the Zanadiqa identified in a prophetic hadith as the Qadriyya—will be saved and go to heaven ('Asqalani 1407 AH, 3:291, 6:56; Dhahabi 1382 AH, 2:430).

1. Cf. Ibn Abi 'Asim (1419 AH, 1:77), Abu Dawud (n.d., 4:198), Ibn Majah (1419 AH, 4:394), Ajluni (1352 AH, 1:369), and Zayla'i (n.d., 1:447-50).

2. See also Muttaqi al-Hindi (1413 AH, 1:209-13; 11:114-16).

Some scholars believe that the hadith is authentic except for the part which declares all the sects doomed to hell except for one (Shawkani 1382 AH). However, other scholars maintain that not only is this part authentic but it has positively motivated Muslims to search for the truth (Farghal 1972, 57-58).

B. Differences and Contradictions in the Features and Names of the Saved and Doomed Sects

In some reports, not only is the number of the saved and doomed sects mentioned but also their names have been specified. In some of these reports, the saved and doomed sects among Jews and Christians are also specified (Shaykh al-Tusi 1384 Sh, 552, 554; Abu l-Ma‘ali 1376 Sh, 23). However, most heresiographers have only cited the versions that confirm their ideologies; theologians and traditionists have also tried to substantiate their religious or theological beliefs by referring to the versions that suit their agenda.

Before discussing these differences, it is noteworthy that, according to some reports, the Prophet (s) identified the saved sects with certain appellatives, including *ahl al-Islam wa jama‘atuhum* (the people of Islam and their community), *al-jama‘ah* (the community), “that which my companions and I maintain,” *al-sawad al-a‘zam* (the greater mass of people),¹ *ahl al-sunnah wa l-jama‘ah* (the people of the tradition and community) (Shahrastani 1363 SH, 21; A. Razi 1957, 252), “those who follow the unlettered Prophet (s)” (Shahrastani 1363 SH, 21; A. Razi 1957, 252), “those who maintain what you [i.e., Imam ‘Ali] and your companions maintain,” and “what my family and I follow today” (Majlisi 1403 AH, 28:2, 3, 13; 30:337; 36:336).

On the other hand, different sects have used this hadith to attack their opponents by appealing to its concluding part. Such reports as “the

1. See Muttaqi al-Hindi (1413 AH, 1:209-13). The terms “jama‘a” and “that which my companions and I maintain today” are more often found in Sunni sources and more referred to by Sunni heresiographers.

worst of them are the Shi‘a” (Ibn Abi ‘Asim 1419 AH, 1:71; ‘Iraqi 1961, 30) or “those who make *qiyas* (analogy) by declaring halal what is actually haram and vice-versa” (Muttaqi al-Hindi 1413 AH, 1:210) can be seen in this context. For instance, in his *al-Fisal*, Ibn Hazm takes the standard version of the hadith (which talks about the misguided sects going to hell) to be fake and unreliable, but in his book on jurisprudence *al-Muhalla*, where he criticizes *qiyas* (analogy), he refers to a version of the hadith that states: “The sect which will cause the greatest tribulation for my nation is the one that makes *qiyas*” (Ibn Hazm n.d., 1:62).

2. The Sectarian and Theological Consequences of Hadith al-Iftiraq

The hadith has played an important role in theological discussions and sectarian controversies, particularly in the development of Islamic heresiography. On the other hand, it has been misused by some groups. After citing this hadith, the author of *Tabsirat al-‘ulum* writes, “Know that each of these sects say that they are the saved one and the rest are all misguided infidels who will spend the eternity in hell ... but there is a public consensus that when these sects admit to *shahadatain*, the Creator, the prophets, and the principles of shariah, their blood, property, wives, and children are preserved... if anyone says otherwise, it is because of their bias and impiety” (‘Alam al-Huda 1313 Sh, 28). Although, as this writer states, the teachings of the Qur’an and sunnah do not consider the path to salvation and Paradise so narrow and rarely accessible, those Muslim historians who were supposed to report the beliefs and thoughts of Islamic sects objectively used this hadith to promote their own religious affiliation and attack and even excommunicate the others.¹ Of course, there is no problem in fairly

1. See, for instance, Malati (1993, 29), Ibn Murtada (1988, 26), Ibn Hazm (1416 AH, 2:275; 5:43, 46, 50, 62), ‘Iraqi (1961, 6-8), and ‘Alam al-Huda (1313 Sh, 41).

critiquing other people's beliefs, but it is not acceptable to exclude other sects from the ummah¹ relying only on this hadith.

It is quite difficult to address the theological, jurisprudential, and possibly political applications of this hadith by different groups; therefore, in this article, we only focus on one of the most important historical outcomes of this hadith, reflected in many works of heresiography, which is trying to match the actual number of Muslim sects with the numbers given in the hadith.

In order to match the numbers, heresiographers sometimes made up imaginary sects and sometimes disregarded the real ones; whereas, even if the hadith was authentic, it would be possible to interpret it allegorically—especially considering the fact that some early and well-known figures of heresiography, such as al-Nawbakhti and Abu l-Hasan al-Ash'ari did not cite this hadith and did not try to match their classifications of Muslim sects with it.

Moreover, it should be noted that even some scholars who were not practically committed to match their classification with the numbers given in the hadith accepted it in one way or another. The author of the book *Masa'il al-Imamiyya*, one of the earliest sources of heresiography available to us from the 4th/10th century, takes the situation of Muslim sects at his time to be evidence for the reliability of *hadith al-iftiraq* (Nashi al-Akbar 1971, 20). In his book *I'tiqadat firaq al-muslimin*, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi did not clearly cite this hadith either and did not try to match his classification of Muslim sects with it, but in an answer to the question why his list of Muslim sects exceeds the number seventy-three, he said that the Prophet's (s) remark was concerned only with the main sects (F. Razi 1363 Sh, 75-76).

1. See Naysaburi (1363 Sh, 4, 7).

However, al-Malati, Abu l-Ma‘ali, al-Baghdadi, al-Isfarayini, and al-Shahrastani have tried so hard to list exactly seventy-three Muslim sects in order to match the number given in the most widely cited versions of the hadith. This effort is also undertaken by some contemporary writers, who have selectively listed seventy-three Muslim sects in order to preserve the authenticity of the hadith (Hakimi 1410 AH).¹ It is notable that most of these authors do not mention any divisions for the branch to which they belong, but they count the divisions of the other branches excessively.

Of course, there have been several factors for the chaotic state of heresiography in Islam, including the lack of a clear definition for what counts as a sect, failing to provide evidence for the existence of certain sects, and sectarian animosities; however, the strive to make a list that matches the details given in Hadith al-Iftiraq has played a significant role.

3. A Content Analysis of the Hadith

Based on the aforementioned issues, it can be said that Hadith al-Iftiraq, according to its more common versions, insinuates three messages: (1) that the Muslim community will be divided more than Jews and Christians were divided, (2) that all Muslim sects will go astray and end up in hell except for one sect, and (3) specification of the saved sect.

As indicated earlier, given the multiplicity of the hadith’s versions, some have regarded the weakness in its chains of transmitters unimportant. On the other hand, doubting the prophecy of the Prophet (s) or the truth of his prophecies are not based on solid theological foundations, nor do they match the traditional and historical evidence. Nevertheless, several questions can be raised as regards this hadith,

1. Despite considering Wahhabism as a sect and briefly mentioning their doctrines and beliefs, Hakimi does not include Wahhabism in the seventy-three sects so that he can preserve the number.

answering which can help remove many confusions in heresiographical studies, defend the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and hopefully bring Muslim sects closer together. The questions are as follow:

1. Which of the mentioned versions—with all the differences and discrepancies between them—is meant by those scholars who claim that the hadith is not only well-known but also massively transmitted or accepted by consensus? It should be noted that a hadith does not become well-known only when it is reported by a significant number of narrators or issued at various occasions for a large group of people; it is likely that some hadiths have become well-known only as a result of sectarian incentives or because their narrators often appealed to them to prove their own beliefs. Therefore, just because a tradition is famous among people or even among scholars, it does not mean that it is authentic. Although the current study does not aim to discuss the authenticity of the various versions of the hadith,¹ it should not be forgotten that some Muslim narrators of hadith unfortunately distorted or made up hadiths with sound chains of transmitters where it suited their agendas.²

Those who appeal to Hadith al-Iftiraq have dismissed the fact that the number seventy-three in the hadith may have been simply an expression of plurality, not a reference to the actual number of Muslim sects. They have disregarded the fact that

1. For a study of the authenticity of the hadith, see Haythami (1402 AH, 7:511-16), 'Ajluni (1352 AH, 1:369), Ibn al-Wazir (1406 AH, 3: 170-72), Zayla'i (n.d., 1: 447-50), Subhani (1411 AH, 1: 24-26). In the latter work, the author mentions the Sunni critique of the authenticity of the hadith, and considers the two versions of the hadith quoted by al-Shaykh al-Saduq inauthentic. Nevertheless, he writes: "The multiplicity of the reports of this hadith in Shi'i and Sunni hadith collections nullifies the weakness of its chains of transmitters" (Subhani 1411 AH, 2: 1366).

2. See, for instance, 'Iraqi (1961, 43), 'Alam al-Huda (1313 Sh, 46), Isfara'ini (n.d., 21), and Subhani (1411 AH, 3:124).

the number given in the hadith is incompatible with the historical facts of the emergence of sects in the past religions. None has mentioned any definitions for a sect, nor have they mentioned at what point in history the seventy-three sects will appear. In the hadith itself, no timing is given, and the time has not come to an end, so why should it be assumed that the seventy-three sects are the ones that were formed in the first three centuries of the history of Islam?¹ It may be said that the secret behind inattention to such issues is the fact that the hadith is useful in the profession of heresiography and polemics against the rival sects.

2. Obviously, the primary purpose of the Prophet (s) was to guide and establish a faith-based community relying on the teachings of the Qur'an. Although warning was necessary, the Prophet was essentially a mercy for the world and a bearer of glad tidings, who founded his mission upon giving hope, good news, and happiness.² Now, the question is how the Prophet of mercy (s) could tell his newly-based community—described in the Qur'an as the “best” (Qur'an 3:110) and “moderate” (2:143) community—that they were doomed to such a devastating division and that the majority of them would be condemned to hell?³ Does any farmer take pride in his products that are

1. For more information on such questions and doubts, see Subhani (1411 AH, 1:24-27).

2. In the Qur'an, the attribute *mubashshir* (bearer of glad tidings) precedes the attribute *nadhir* (warner). Although one of the missions of the Qur'an and the Prophet (s) was warning, this was not meant to disappoint people but to preserve them from going astray. To show a well to someone and warning them against falling into it is one thing, and to inform someone that they will definitely fall into a well is another thing; each has a different objective (See Qur'an 2:119; 5:19; 34:28; 35:45; 17:105; 33:45; 53:56; 13:7).

3. For traditions on the characteristics and superiority of the Muslim community as regards guidance and salvation, see Qummi (1428 AH, 3:3 ff.) and Ibn

devastated by pests, or does any father take pride in his children most of whom are wicked? And would not such statement from the Prophet (s) be regarded by people as a declaration of failure for his mission? As a matter of fact, we are not concerned with what occurred during the Islamic history, but we certainly doubt that the Prophet (s) himself announced such news to people.

At any rate, the manifest meaning of the hadith and the way it has usually been interpreted have left more negative consequences than positive results—unless the ending part of the hadith is considered fabricated, in which case it can be said that the Prophet (s) predicted the division of his community without judging it. Division itself is not necessarily an evil phenomenon; rather, the division of the Muslim ummah is a blessing caused by the plurality of Muslim communities and the richness of the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, of which the Prophet (s) was fully aware.

However, the aforementioned justification is not supported by the manifest meaning of the hadith. Controversies and divisions among the past nations have been mentioned in the Qur'an as caused by impiety and disobedience, and the believers are warned against following their steps.

3. There is no doubt that the Prophet (s) strived tirelessly, according to his universal mission, to guide people towards salvation. Introducing the Qur'an and his family (*ahl al-bayt*) as two precious things (*thaqalayn*), whose guidance guarantees salvation for his followers, and likening the *ahl al-bayt* to Noah's ark and stars of guidance are among the measures the

Kathir (1402 AH, 1:391-97; 2:80-85). The late Allamah Tabataba'i also affirms the superiority of the Muslim ummah over other nations (Tabataba'i 1393 AH, 3:376-77).

Prophet (s) took to preserve his followers from going astray after him. A question raised here is how the Prophet (s) could make these efforts and, at the same time, announce that most of his followers will go astray and end up in hell. Would it be wise for someone to strive so much for a purpose and, at the same time, announce that he will fail in achieving it? Of course, this is not to deny the facts that took place after the Prophet (s), but an indication that it is unlikely for the Prophet (s) to have made such a statement.

4. Moreover, the Prophet (s) and *ahl al-bayt* (a) have instructed us repeatedly to check the sayings attributed to them with the teachings of the Qur'an.¹ Indeed, it is quite difficult to unravel the spiritual nature of the teachings of the Qur'an; however, one may ask whether there are any verses in the Qur'an that give disappointing news regarding the future of the Muslim community. The scholars consider one aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an to be its prediction of the future events. Although there are only a few such cases and the teachings of the Qur'an are not based on them, these few examples of prediction clarify the fact that these verses are mainly hope-inspiring and pursue educational goals; they are not disappointing statements to rebuke anyone. Therefore, the Prophet (s), who was a complete manifestation of Qur'anic teachings and values and considered the authenticity of the words attributed to him to depend on their accordance with the letter and spirit of Qur'an, would never say a word that would not solve a spiritual or social problem for the Muslim community, let alone words that give rise to chaos, frustration, and disappointment. We should note, in particular, that the

1. See, for instance, Kulayni (1401 AH, 1: 69 ff.) and Hurr al-'Amili (1403 AH, 18:86 ff.).

Muslim community was newly established at the time of the Prophet (s), and its fundamental need was the reinforcement of the religious spirit, as well as submission to the truths of revelation.

5. Finally, it is not possible to prove important, fundamental, and decisive topics associated with ideological and theological matters, the acceptance of which requires certainty, by resorting to a hadith whose authenticity is not clear (Fadlallah 1405 AH, 1:11).

Influenced by such Qur'anic and traditional teachings, great Muslim leaders such as Imam Khomeini considered the Hereafter to be founded upon God's infinite mercy; there, they believed, the righteousness of each person will be judged individually and in accordance with the context and circumstances of his life and his capabilities (Khomeini 1387 Sh, 485). Not only do they believe that the majority of Muslims, regardless of their denominational affiliation, will be saved; they also maintain that the majority of the followers of other religions will be saved, because most people bear no animosity towards the truth, and they will follow the Right Path if they recognize it (Khomeini 1368 Sh, 1:33; Mutahhari 1368 Sh, 1:272 ff.; Kirmnashahi 1370 Sh, 2:398).

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