

Challenges in Authenticating Hadith: The Science of Hadith

*The science of hadith critically examines the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Infallibles, ensuring their authenticity through rigorous methodologies. This science remains fundamental, especially in legal studies (fiqh), and is traditionally divided into **Dirāyat al-Hadith, Riwāyat al-Hadith, and Rijāl al-Hadith**. The Prophet himself encouraged the preservation of his teachings, stating:*

“Whoever writes down knowledge or a hadith from me, the reward will continue to be written for them as long as that knowledge or hadith remains”((Ta’rikh Khulafā’, Suyuti, p. 77))

Despite its central role in seminaries, the public often misunderstands technical terms like *sahih*, *da’if*, and *hasan*, assuming literal meanings. For instance, a *da’if* classification does not denote fabrication, rather it highlights weaknesses or unknown narrators in the chain. This discussion outlines how scholars historically authenticated hadith, affirming the reliability of our sources in *aqaid*, *fiqh*, and other related fields.

This article begins by examining the historical methods of hadith authentication, focusing on the periods before and after ‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī. This division is significant due to a notable shift in the approach to authenticating hadith between these two eras. Prior to ‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī, early scholars emphasized *wuthūq al-ṣudūr*—confidence in the attribution of a narration to an Imām. Being closer in time to the Imāms, they had access to various contextual indicators that enabled them to assess the reliability of narrations. As time progressed, many of these indicators were lost due to historical and sociopolitical factors. **In response to this shift, ‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī introduced a new methodology that prioritized the scrutiny of the chain of transmission (*isnād*) to**

determine the authenticity of a narration. This paper explores these evolving methodologies and analyzes their implications for the science of hadith authentication.

History of Hadith Formation

During his lifetime, the Prophet extensively explained the Qur'an and Islamic rulings. After the Hijrah, as Islamic rulings expanded to both personal and societal matters, the Prophet increasingly explained and interpreted the Qur'an through his statements. However, after his passing, the first two caliphs banned the transmission and recording of *hadith*—a ban lasting nearly a century, lifted only during the reign of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz. Abu Bakr ordered the destruction of recorded narrations, and Umar discouraged hadith dissemination to focus on the Qur'an. Some Sunni sources report that 'Umar considered compiling hadith but ultimately refrained from doing so.((*Kanz al-'Ummāl, al-Muttaqī al-Hindī*, vol. 10, p. 291, Hadith 29474)) Sunni scholars have offered various explanations for the early prohibition on recording hadith. Chief among them were concerns that hadith might be confused with the Qur'an and fears((*Kanz al-'Ummāl, al-Muttaqī al-Hindī*, vol. 10, p. 291, Hadith 29474)) of discord among Muslims.((*Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāẓ, al-Dhahabī*, vol. 1, p. 9)) Al-Dhahabī attempts to justify Abū Bakr's prohibition on hadith transmission by arguing that his intention was to verify and investigate reports, not to close the door to narration. **However, historical evidence contradicts this interpretation; as the ban contributed to the loss of many narrations and increased the risk of fabrication.** In contrast, the Shī'a community preserved the prophetic teachings with greater continuity. Imam Ali compiled the first hadith collection, which was safeguarded by subsequent Imams and occasionally referenced in later traditions.((*Ta'sis al-Shia*, p. 279)) The efforts intensified during the time of Imam al-Baqir and Imam al-Sadiq, leading to 400 foundational works known as *al-Usul al-Arba' Mi'ah*. Later, during Imam al-Ridha's era, hadith transmission flourished, with 360 individuals narrating from him directly.((*Musnad Imam Ridha*, Shaykh 'Azīzullāh 'Aṭṭārdī, vol. 2, p. 70))

History of Hadith Formation: Historical Methods of Hadith Authentication

Throughout Islamic history, various methodologies for hadith authentication have been proposed. A major turning point occurred during the era of ‘Allāmah Ḥillī. During ‘Allāmah Ḥillī’s era, with the expansion of *fiqh* and *uṣūl*, increased interaction with Sunni scholarship, loss of the contextual indicators present during the earlier period but lost during Allamah’s time and the intermixing of authentic and weak narrations, ‘Allāmah Ḥillī and his teacher Aḥmad ibn Ṭāwūs al-Ḥillī introduced a different/more streamlined method—the *science of dirāyah*.((*Mashriq al-Shamsayn*, p. 271)) They categorized narrations using terms like *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic), *ḥasan* (good), and *mawthūq* (reliable). Although Shaykh Bahā’ī credits ‘Allāmah Ḥillī with founding *dirāyah*, earlier traces of this discipline are evident in earlier scholars’ works and the narrations of the Imams.((*Mashriq al-Shamsayn wa Iksīr al-Sa‘ādatayn ma’a Ta’līqāt al-Khwājū’ī*, vol. 1, p. 33)) However, previous usage was not independent but complemented by contextual analysis. While ‘Allāmah Hilli systematized the classification of hadith, he sometimes applied earlier methodologies. For example, in *al-Khulāṣa*, he states that al-Ṣadūq’s chain to Abū Maryam al-Anṣārī is *ṣaḥīḥ*, despite the presence of Abān ibn ‘Uthmān, based on the Shi’a community’s consensus about narrations reliably transmitted from them.((*Mashriq al-Shamsayn*, vol. 1, p. 270))

Thus, in this discussion, the historical development of hadith authentication is divided into two phases:

- Pre-‘Allāmah Ḥillī
- Post-‘Allāmah Ḥillī

Pre-‘Allāmah Ḥillī: Wuthūq Ṣudūrī

Before ‘Allāmah Ḥillī, many scholars employed several methods in the evaluation of hadith. For instance Sheikh Mufid utilized multiple methodologies to assess narrations. One of these was *Naqd-e matn-maḥwar* or text-based

criticism in which the validation and evaluation of the narrations conducted by comparing their content against definitive sources and criteria of religious knowledge namely, the Noble Qur'an, reason (*'aql*), Sunnah, or external sources such as established historical facts and empirical realities.((*Al-Masā'il al-Ṣāghāniyya*, Shaykh al-Mufīd pp 90)) **Another widely adopted method was the principle of *wuthūq ṣudūrī*, that is, confidence in the attribution of a narration to an Imam. The reliability of narrators was only one of several contextual indicators assessed, rather than being the sole criterion.** Early scholars, including al-Kulaynī, Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, and al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī, adhered to this methodology.

Among the contextual indicators employed were:

1. Presentation of Books to the Imams and Their Endorsement

A crucial indicator was the presentation of compiled hadith works (*aṣl* or *kitāb*) to the Imams for verification. Approval of such works by the Imams served as strong evidence of their authenticity. For instance Ubaydullah ibn 'Alī al-Ḥalabī presented his work to the Imam, who endorsed it.((*Wasā'il al-Shī'a*, Shaykh Ḥurr al-Āmilī, vol. 20, p. 98)) Conversely, Yunus ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān presented narrations heard in Kūfa, and the Imam rejected some of them.((*Ikhtiyār Ma'rifat al-Rijāl*, Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, vol. 1, p. 224)) Al-Kulaynī records such events in *al-Kāfī*((vol. 7, p. 324)), where a narration mentions that Yunus presented a book to Imam al-Riḍā (A), who affirmed its authenticity.

Later jurists, such as Ṣāhib al-Jawāhir and al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ardabīlī, heavily relied on such indicators. For example, in discussions on *diyāt*, they cite Zarīf's work as reliable based on its endorsement by an Imam. **However later scholars who are proponents of the sanad method, like al-Shahīd al-Thānī doubted its chains due to figures like al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī ibn Faḍḍāl and Sahl ibn Ziyād**((*Rawḍat al-Bahiyyah*, vol. 10, p. 253; vol. 7, p. 322)) **and thus considered the book as weak in its categorization. Thus, endorsement by the Imam of compilations was a vital method of**

authentication.

2. Appearance of Hadiths in Multiple Aṣl

The *aṣl* were independent compilations by early Shī'ī narrators who directly heard narrations from the Imams. Their authenticity was highly trusted because they minimized copying errors. *Usul al-Arba' Mi'ah* played a major role. Scholars like Mirzā Nā'inī and Waḥīd Bahbahānī considered a hadith's inclusion in *al-Kāfī* a strong sign of authenticity. Fayḍ Kāshānī noted that hadiths appearing in multiple *Usul* or compiled by one of the Aṣḥāb al-Ijmā' narrators were deemed authentic. ((*al-Wāfī*, vol. 1, p. 22)) Similarly, Āqā Buzurg Tihirānī asserts that the appearance of a narration in several *Usul* strengthens its credibility. ((*al-Dharī'ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah*, vol. 2, p. 126)) Al-Muḥaqqiq al-Dāmād also stressed on reliance on *Usul* for verification. ((*al-Rawāshiḥ al-Samāwīyah*, vol. 1, p. 99))

3. Comparing Manuscripts

Scholars traditionally compared manuscripts to detect interpolations or distortions. This method remains essential in verifying the text and chain of a hadith. For example, Shaykh Ṭūsī and Shaykh al-Kulaynī both transmit a narration concerning the legal rulings for women in nifās (bleeding after childbirth), but notable textual differences appear:

Shaykh Ṭūsī records:

مَا أَخْبَرَنِي بِهِ الشَّيْخُ ... النُّفَسَاءُ تَكْفُ عَنْ الصَّلَاةِ أَيَّامَهَا الَّتِي كَانَتْ
تَمْكُثُ فِيهَا ثُمَّ تَغْتَسِلُ كَمَا تَغْتَسِلُ الْمُسْتَحَاضَةُ

(*Tahdhīb*, vol. 1, p. 173),

"The post-natal woman (*al-nufasā'*) refrains from prayer during the days she would normally remain [in bleeding], then she performs ghusl just as the woman with irregular bleeding (*al-mustahāḍah*) does."

and elsewhere:

... النَّفْسَاءُ تَكْفُ عَنْ الصَّلَاةِ أَيَّامَ أَقْرَائِهَا ... ثُمَّ تَغْتَسِلُ وَتُصَلِّي كَمَا
تَغْتَسِلُ الْمُسْتَحَاضَةُ

(Tahdhīb, vol. 1, p. 176).

“The post-natal woman (*al-nufasā*) refrains from prayer during the days of her bleeding... then she performs ghusl and prays just as the woman with irregular bleeding (*al-mustaḥāḍah*) does.”

In *al-Kāfī*, Shaykh al-Kulaynī transmits:

... النَّفْسَاءُ تَكْفُ عَنْ الصَّلَاةِ أَيَّامَ أَقْرَائِهَا ... ثُمَّ تَغْتَسِلُ وَتَعْمَلُ كَمَا
تَعْمَلُ الْمُسْتَحَاضَةُ

(*al-Kāfī*, vol. 3, pp. 97–98).

“The post-natal woman (*al-nufasā*) refrains from prayer during the days of her bleeding... then she performs ghusl and acts as the woman with irregular bleeding (*al-mustaḥāḍah*) does.”

The phrase “*tuṣallī kamā taghtasil al-mustaḥāḍa*” (“she prays as the *mustaḥāḍa* bathes”) in the second narration (Tahdhīb) appears incoherent. The more accurate reading, preserved in *al-Kāfī*, is “*ta‘mal kamā ta‘mal al-mustaḥāḍa*” (“she acts as the *mustaḥāḍa* acts”). All three transmissions ultimately trace back to Nawādir Ibn Abī ‘Umayr. The variation arises from differences between the transmissions of Ḥusayn ibn Sa‘īd, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zurārah, and the widely accepted recension transmitted by Ibrāhīm ibn Hāshim.

Manuscript comparison is also essential in assessing chains of transmission (*isnād*). For instance, in *Kitāb al-‘Ilal*, Ibn Bābawayh narrates through:

Muhammad ibn Mūsā ibn al-Mutawakkil → ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sa‘d Ābādī → Aḥmad ibn Abī ‘Abd Allāh al-Barqī → Ismā‘īl ibn Mihrān → Aḥmad ibn

Muḥammad ibn Jābir → Zaynab bint ‘Alī → Faṭima (PBUH).

However, in another version transmitted by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq:

Muhammad ibn Mūsā ibn al-Mutawakkil → ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sa’d Ābādī → Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khālīd al-Barqī → his father → Ismā‘īl ibn Mihrān → Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Khuzā‘ī → Muḥammad ibn Jābir → ‘Abbād al-‘Āmirī → Zaynab bint ‘Alī → Faṭima (PBUH).

Comparison reveals omissions and inaccuracies in the former chain, where two narrators are missing and some names are incorrectly recorded. ((*Pajūhishī dar ‘Ilm al-Rijāl*, Akbar Turabi Shahriza’i, pp. 23-24))

Thus, the practice of comparing manuscripts and variant transmissions remains a crucial tool for verifying both the textual integrity and the authenticity of hadith chains.

4. Examination of the Chain of Narration

Early scholars did not assess the authenticity of a hadith solely based on the reliability of its chain of transmission (*isnād*), nor did they reject a narration purely due to a weak chain. Rather, the strength of the *isnād* was one of several indicators used to evaluate a report. Critical to this process was also the analysis of the hadith’s content. Nonetheless, knowledge of the narrators and their attributes remained essential for jurists, as rulings could not be issued without this assessment given that some were known fabricators, others narrated from weak authorities, some lacked precision or were prone to forgetfulness, and others, while not Imāmī, transmitted sayings from the Imams—requiring further scrutiny to determine alignment with Imāmī jurisprudence or the possibility of taqiyya. ((*Uddat al-Uṣūl*, al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, vol. 1, p. 150))

The Imams themselves warned about tampering:

For instance, Imam al-Ṣādiq warns:

“Mughīrah ibn Sa‘īd tampered with the books of my father’s companions and inserted narrations not from my father”.((*Ikhtiyār Ma‘rifat al-Rijāl [Rijāl al-Kashshī*, al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, vol. 1, p. 223))

Similarly, Imam ‘Alī, when asked about contradictory reports, explained:

“One who heard something from the Prophet but did not memorize it accurately would convey it as he understood it. He does not intentionally lie, but he acts upon it and claims: ‘I heard it from the Messenger of Allah’”.((*Nahj al-Balāgha*, sermon 210))

At times, scholars explicitly rejected narrations based on isnād analysis. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, for example, dismisses certain reports because:

“These are solitary reports that neither establish certainty nor obligate action. Moreover, their narrator, ‘Imrān al-Za‘farānī, is unknown, and both chains include weak transmitters whose solitary reports we do not act upon”. ((*al-Istibṣār*, Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, vol. 2, p. 76))

Other contextual indicators included the acceptance of a narration by Qummī scholars, the reliability of Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s *mursalāt*, reliance on the Aṣḥāb al-Ijmā‘, and narrations transmitted by certified teachers (*shuyūkh al-ijāzah*).

Hadith Assessment Post-‘Allāmah Ḥillī: Wuthuq Sanadi

In the post-‘Allāmah Ḥillī period, a distinct methodology emerged wherein jurists assessed hadiths solely based on the soundness of the *isnād* (chain of transmission). According to this approach, a narration must possess an authenticated and verified chain for it to be accepted; any flaw in the chain—regardless of supporting contextual indicators—would result in the rejection of the report. Among the past four centuries of juristic practice, the most notable proponent of this method is Ayatullah al-Khu‘i. Preceding him, it was widely adopted by Shāhīd al-Thānī and Mullā Aḥmad al-Muqaddas al-Ardabīlī the author of *Majma‘ al-Fā‘ida wa al-*

Burhān.((*Dars-e Khārij-e Fiqh*, Ustād Muḥammad Ḥasan Rabānī Bīrjandī, 14/0/1401 solar))

Within this framework, the trustworthiness (*tawthīq*) of narrators is established either through specific attestations or through general indications.

Specific attestations (*tawthīq khāṣṣ*) refer to judgments of trustworthiness (*‘adālah* or *thiqah*) pertaining to one or a few narrators, without relying on a broader criterion applicable to others.

Several methods exist within this category:

First Method: An attestation is derived from statements issued by one of the Infallible Imams, either explicitly, implicitly, or necessarily affirming a narrator’s reliability. For example: Ḥamdawayh reports:

“Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā ibn ‘Ubayd and Ya‘qūb ibn Yazīd narrated to me from Ibn Abī ‘Umayr, from Abū al-‘Abbās al-Baqbaq, from Abū ‘Abdillāh (al-Ṣādiq, peace be upon him), who said: ‘There are four people most beloved to me in life and death: Burayd ibn Mu‘āwiyah al-‘Ijlī, Zurārah ibn A‘yan, Muḥammad ibn Muslim, and Abū Ja‘far al-Aḥwal.’”.(*Ikhtiyār Ma‘rifat al-Rijāl* (Rijāl al-Kashshī), al-Ṭūsī, p. 135, ḥadīth 215))

The chain here is considered *ṣaḥīḥ*, as all transmitters are Imāmī and ‘ādil.

Second Method: Explicit attestations from early *rijāl* scholars such as Shaykh Ṣadūq, al-Najāshī, al-Kashshī, and al-Ṭūsī. For instance, al-Najāshī writes:

Third Method: Endorsements by later scholars (*muta’akhkhirīn*)

Fourth Method: A jurist compiles various indicators to attain certainty regarding a narrator’s trustworthiness. This method, considered the most reliable, requires comprehensive expertise in the narrators’ biographies, transmission patterns, precision, teachers, students, and contextual factors.

For example, regarding Ḥārith ibn Abī Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Nu‘mān:

- Al-Najāshī notes his work was transmitted by trusted companions, including al-Ḥasan ibn Maḥbūb.
- Al-Ṭūsī mentions he authored an *aṣl* and identifies him among the companions of Imam al-Ṣādiq (peace be upon him).
- Al-Waḥīd al-Bahbahānī and others relied on his narrations, recognizing their precedence even over other sound reports in cases of contradiction.

The cumulative indicators—widespread transmission, association with primary sources, narrating through figures of *ijmāʿ*, and scholarly preference for his narrations—establish confidence in his reliability. ((*Pajūhish dar ʿIlm al-Rijāl*, p. 196))

In hadith evaluation, general attestations (*tawthīq ʿām*) refer to the validation of a group of narrators based on their inclusion within recognized categories or fulfillment of specific criteria. A narrator's reliability (*thiqah*) may be established if they belong to the *Aṣḥāb al-Ijmāʿ*, are narrated by them directly or indirectly, or are transmitted by one of the three principal scholars: al-Kulaynī, al-Ṣadūq, or al-Ṭūsī. Other indicators include being among the teachers (*mashāyikh*) of al-Najāshī, appearing in the transmission chains of key works such as the *Tafsīr* of ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī or *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt*, narrating a large number of traditions, or being the subject of scholarly expressions of mercy (*tarāḥḥum*). Frequent narration by al-Kulaynī, appearing in chains classified as *ṣaḥīḥah* (authentic) through *taṣḥīḥ al-isnād*, or serving as a representative (*wakīl*) of an Imam are also strong indicators. Additionally, reliability may be inferred if a narrator received scholarly authorization (*ijāzah*), authored an original work (*aṣl*), was affirmed as trustworthy by later scholars, or was narrated by notable figures such as the Banū Faḍḍāl or Jaʿfar ibn Bashīr. Being counted among the teachers of the Qummī scholars or those of al-Ṣadūq further strengthens the presumption of a narrator's trustworthiness.

A Modern Approach to Hadith Authentication

As previously outlined, reliance solely on the transmitters within a chain (*isnād*) does not yield definitive proof of a narration's authenticity, given that narrations with weak chains may nonetheless align reliably with Shi'i doctrinal principles. **Consequently, a more comprehensive and nuanced method is necessary—one that synthesizes all available evidence to reach a sound judgment.** Among the emerging approaches is the *Fihristi* method, pioneered by Ayatollah Aḥmad Madadī al-Mūsawī in his *dars al-khārij* lectures and systematized by his students in works such as *Nigāhī bi Daryā* (Ayatollah Madadi), *Bāzsāzī-i Mutūn-i Kuhn-i Ḥadīth-i Shī'a* (Sayyid Muḥammad Emādī), and *Fahāris al-Shī'a* (Mehdī Khodāmīān).

Tahlīl-i Fihristī (تحلیل فهرستی) evaluates narrations through a cumulative process of compiling, analyzing, and weighing evidence to establish the degree of confidence in a narration's reliability. It is a dynamic, evolving methodology wherein new findings continually refine or correct earlier conclusions. Unlike classical *'ilm al-rijāl*, which aims to classify narrations rigidly as *ṣaḥīḥ*, *ḥasan*, *muwaththaq*, or *ḍa'īf*, *Tahlīl-i Fihristī* assesses narrations on a continuum of credibility, determined by the accumulation of contextual indicators. This method recognizes that the authenticity of a hadith is not a mechanical process waiting to be discovered, but rather a confidence-based judgment formed through critical evaluation.

A secondary contribution of the *Fihristi* method is its illumination of historical processes. For instance, while the transmission history of narrations in al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* remains largely obscure regarding the shift from oral to written forms, many Shī'ī transmissions offer clearer historical trajectories. An example is the chain:

ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm → his father → Ḥammād → Ḥarīz → Zurārah → Abū Jaʿfar (ʿa). While Abū Jaʿfar (ʿa) transmitted orally, Zurārah may have committed the narration to writing. Ḥarīz, who definitively authored a book, transmitted it to Ḥammād, who likewise preserved it in writing. This written corpus was

subsequently transmitted to Qom by Ibrāhīm ibn Hāshim and eventually to al-Kulaynī, illustrating a traceable historical pathway.((Madadī, Advanced Fiqh, 1396/8/2 [November 23, 2017]))

In addition to mapping out the historical trajectory of transmission, the *Fihristi* method also substantiates the authenticity of a narration by locating it within early authoritative compilations that can be reliably traced back to the Infallible Imams (‘a). Through this process, the method reconstructs a chain of contextual and historical indicators that enhance epistemic certainty. As such, the authenticity of a hadith, within this framework, is directly linked to the credibility of the source in which it is preserved. Thus the narration’s validity becomes as sound as that of the book itself.((Arzyābī-ye ḥadīth be ravesh-e “taḥlīl-e fehrestī”; didgāhhā va mabānī, Sayyid Reżā Shīrāzī and Maḥmūd Malakī, pp. 35–36.))

When a narration possesses both *rijālī* and *fihristi* credibility, its content is further evaluated across three historical stages: (1) the context of issuance, (2) the reaction of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a), and (3) its transition into *fatwā* (legal ruling).

It is evident that this methodology necessitates a profound and *ijtihādī* mastery of hadith sciences and cannot be employed without first undergoing rigorous and comprehensive scholarly training in the discipline.

Conclusion

The authentication of hadith has always been a critical and dynamic endeavor within Islamic scholarship, evolving alongside the intellectual and societal needs of the Muslim community. Many early scholars prioritized *wuthūq ṣudūrī*—confidence in attribution—by relying on contextual indicators such as the endorsement of hadith compilations by the Imams, cross-referencing multiple Usul, manuscript comparison, and chain analysis. Over time, especially after the era of ‘Allāmah Ḥillī, the science of *dirāyah* became more streamlined, shifting focus toward *wuthūq sanadī*—the reliability of the transmission chain itself. This methodological shift, while adding precision, also led to the dismissal

of many narrations that earlier scholars had accepted based on holistic indicators. Understanding these developments highlights not only the rigorous efforts undertaken to preserve the teachings of the Prophet and his progeny but also the diversity of approaches within our scholarly heritage. It is crucial, given the rigorous process of hadith authentication, that narrations are not merely classified as *sahih* (authentic) or *da'if* (weak) by the public and subsequently dismissed without thorough scholarly analysis. Labeling a hadith as *sahih* or *da'if* without proper examination can result in oversimplifications and distortions of Islamic teachings.