

THE SCIENCES OF HADITH

A Beginner's Guide



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Introduction:

In Islam, our primary source of guidance is the Holy Quran, a truth universally acknowledged among all Muslims. However, alongside the Quran, there exists a second fundamental source of knowledge and practice: the Sunnah. This Sunnah is preserved through the teachings and actions of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and his pure household, the Ahlulbayt (peace be upon them). As Muslims, we are obligated to uphold both sources, as emphasized in the well-known Hadith al-Thaqalayn, where the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) declared that true guidance lies in adhering to the Quran and his Ahlulbayt.

This hadith is widely recognized in both Sunni and Shia sources. For instance, we cite it from *Kamal al-Din by shaykh al-saduq(ra)*, vol1, P264 as follows:

The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him and his family) said:

"Indeed, I am leaving behind two matters among you, one of which is greater than the other: the Book of Allah, a rope extended from the heavens to the earth, whose one end is in the hand of Allah, and my progeny. Verily, they will never separate until they return to me at the Fountain."¹

Recognizing the significance of this second source, we are about to embark on a study of the sciences of hadith, delving deeper into *'Ilm al-Hadith* to gain a more comprehensive understanding of prophetic traditions. Through this discipline, we will explore various key aspects, including the history of hadith, the contextual analysis of narrations (*Diraya*), and the study of hadith narrators and their reliability (*'Ilm al-Rijal*), among other essential components. This journey will equip us with the tools needed to critically assess and appreciate the depth of hadith literature.

¹[Kamal al-Din by shaykh al-saduq\(ra\). vol1. P264](#)

Chapter 1: Need of Referring Hadith

When we turn to the sources of Islamic knowledge after the Holy Quran, we find that the Hadith holds a central position in guiding us through various aspects of our religion. The need to refer to Hadith becomes evident in several key areas, each of which is deeply enriched by the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and his Ahlulbayt (peace be upon them). Let us briefly discuss these key areas:

1. Interpretation of the Holy Quran (Tafsir)

Tafsir is the science of interpreting the Quran. While there are many commentaries on the Quran, Shia scholars emphasize the role of Hadith in interpretation, rather than relying solely on personal opinion (*Tafsir bil Ra'y*). For example, Shia Tafsir books like ***al-Burhan fi tafsir al-Quran by Hashim Bahrani***(*May Allah Bless his soul*) and ***Tafsir al-Qummi by Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi***(*May Allah Bless his soul*) extensively incorporate Hadiths from the Prophet and the Ahlulbayt to explain the verses. These Hadiths provide insights into the deeper meanings of the Quranic verses, something that would not be fully understood without the Sunnah.

2. Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

In the field of Islamic jurisprudence, the Hadith plays a fundamental role in deriving legal rulings. Shia jurisprudence is built upon Hadith literature, especially collections such as ***al-Kafi by Shaykh al-Kulayni***, ***Man La Yahzar al-Faqih by Shaykh al-Saduq***, and ***Wasa'il al-Shi'a by Shaykh al-Hurr al-Aamili***. These books contain narrations that outline the teachings and rulings of the Prophet and Ahlulbayt, serving as the foundation for all Shia legal thought. Without these Hadiths, it would be impossible to establish the rules of worship, social conduct, and personal behavior that are essential in Islam.

3. History of Islam (Tariqh)

To understand the historical events of Islam, such as the lives of the Prophet and the Ahlulbayt, the Hadith plays a critical role. **Books like *al-Irshad by Shaykh al-Mufid()* and *Hayat al-Qulub by Allama Majlisi*** provide detailed accounts of Islamic history, including the biographies of the Imams, the events of their lives, and the challenges they faced. These narrations are vital for understanding the political and social context in which Islam evolved and offer valuable lessons from the lives of the Imams.

4. Understanding the Oneness of Allah (Tawhid)

The concept of Tawhid, or the Oneness of Allah, is central to Islam. For Shia Muslims, books like *Kitab al-Tawhid* by Shaykh al-Saduq are key sources for understanding the theological concepts surrounding Tawhid. The Hadith literature offers profound insights into the nature of Allah, His attributes, and the relationship between Allah and His creation. Without the guidance of Hadith, it would be difficult to comprehend the depth and nuances of Tawhid as taught by the Ahlulbayt.

Chapter 2:What is a Hadith?

Before delving into the importance and nuances of Hadith, it is crucial to understand what exactly constitutes a Hadith. The term *Hadith* refers to the narrations, traditions, and accounts that are attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Infallible Imams (peace be upon them). These narrations can be classified into three primary categories, each reflecting a different aspect of the lives and teachings of these holy figures.

The three key aspects of Hadith are:

1. قول (Qaul) – Sayings

The first and most direct aspect of Hadith is the *Qaul*, or the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) and the Imams (peace be upon them). These are the words that they spoke, whether in response to questions, to clarify religious matters, or to offer general guidance on how to live according to the will of Allah (SWT). The *Qaul* includes everything the Prophet (PBUH) and Imams said, whether about theology, law, ethics, or personal conduct. These sayings are a direct source of knowledge, and they are foundational to understanding Islam.

2. فعل (Fe'l) – Actions

The second aspect of Hadith is the *Fe'l*, or the actions of the Prophet and the Imams. The *Fe'l* refers to everything that the Prophet (PBUH) and Imams (peace be upon them) did in their lives. These actions serve as models for how to live in accordance with divine guidance. They demonstrate the practical application of the Quranic teachings. From the way the Prophet (PBUH) conducted his prayers, to his treatment of others, his social interactions, and his leadership, the *Fe'l* gives us a living

example of how to implement the teachings of Islam in every aspect of our lives.

3. **تقرير (Taqreer) – Tacit Approval**

The third aspect of Hadith is *Taqreer*, or tacit approval. This refers to situations in which the Prophet (PBUH) or the Imams (peace be upon them) did not explicitly speak or act, but they witnessed something happening and either approved or disapproved of it. For instance, if someone performed an action or made a statement in front of the Prophet (PBUH) or an Imam, and they did not object, it is understood that they tacitly approved of the action or statement. On the other hand, if they disapproved, they would correct the action or statement. This aspect of Hadith provides insight into the implicit guidance of the Infallibles and how they ensured that the community adhered to the correct principles without always needing to intervene directly.

Chapter 3: Understanding Ilm al-Dirayah: the science of hadith comprehension

Throughout Islamic history, scholars and students of knowledge have encountered a vast number of narrations (aḥādīth) attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and the Imams (A.S). However, not every narration is to be accepted at face value. The science of Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth (Science of Hadith Comprehension) emerged as a necessary discipline to analyze the meanings, contexts, and applications of hadith. One of the foundational principles of Dirāyah is that even if a hadith is weak (ḍaʿīf) by chain(***we will be reading about chain in our next final chapter***), it may still be reliable if it aligns with the Qur'an. Conversely, even an apparently sound (ṣaḥīḥ) hadith can be unreliable if it contradicts the Qur'an. This principle was emphasized repeatedly by the Imams, as we find in several reports:

1. Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (A.S) narrated from the Prophet (PBUH):
"Indeed, every truth has a reality, and every correct statement has a light. So, whatever conforms to the Book of Allah, take it, and whatever contradicts the Book of Allah, leave it." ²

2. In another narration, when asked about contradictory reports from trustworthy and untrustworthy narrators, Imam al-Ṣādiq (A.S) advised:
"If a hadith reaches you and you find support for it in the Book of Allah or the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), then accept it. Otherwise, the one who brought it is more entitled to it."³

3. He also said:
"Everything must be referred back to the Book of Allah and the Sunnah, and any hadith that does not agree with the Book of Allah is mere embellishment (zukhraf)." ⁴

² [Alkafi, Vol1, page 69](#)

³ [Ibid.](#)

⁴ [Ibid](#)

These guidelines form the basis of Hadith criticism within Dirāyah, helping scholars determine a hadith's reliability based on several key principles:

1. Conformity with the Qur'an

The Qur'an is the ultimate source of divine guidance, and any hadith that contradicts its clear and essential meanings must either be:

- Fabricated
- Misunderstood
- Or require contextual clarification

Imam Ja'far al-Şādiq (A.S) explicitly instructed:

"Whatever does not conform to the Book of Allah is embellishment (zukhraf)."⁵

This principle means that scholars must always cross-check hadiths with the Qur'an. If a narration suggests something contrary to the explicit teachings of the Qur'an, such as injustice being acceptable, divine laws being arbitrary, or belief in contradictions, then it must be rejected.

2. Aligned with Established Logical Principles

Islam values 'aql (reason) as a means of understanding divine law. If a hadith contradicts established logical principles or leads to absurd conclusions, scholars investigate its authenticity. The Imams (A.S) encouraged reasoning and critical thinking, making it clear that hadiths must not oppose clear rational principles.

For example, if a hadith claims that **"a person is punished for another's sins,"** it contradicts the Qur'anic verse:

"No soul shall bear the burden of another" (Qur'an 6:164).

Similarly, if a hadith suggests that knowledge of Islamic rulings can be gained through mere intuition without evidence, it contradicts the Qur'anic emphasis on learning and reasoning.

⁵ [Alkafi, Vol1, P69](#)

3. Historical and Contextual Analysis

Hadiths were spoken in specific historical, social, and political contexts. Scholars must investigate:

- Was the hadith a general ruling or specific to an event?
- Was it revealed in response to a particular question?
- Did the Prophet (PBUH) or the Imams (A.S) mean it as a binding ruling (mulzam) or as circumstantial guidance?

For example, the Prophet (PBUH) once forbade storing meat for more than three days. However, this was during a time of scarcity, and later, when food was abundant, he lifted the restriction. Understanding the context prevents misapplication of such rulings.

4. Linguistic and Rhetorical Examination

Arabic is a rich and complex language. A hadith's true meaning often depends on linguistic nuances, including:

- Literal vs. metaphorical meanings
- Rhetorical devices used for emphasis, persuasion, or exaggeration

For example, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

“Whoever builds a mosque, Allah builds for him a house in Paradise.”

This does not necessarily mean physically constructing a mosque; it can also mean supporting or contributing to its construction. Without linguistic analysis, one might misinterpret hadiths literally when they were intended metaphorically.

5. Comparative Hadith Analysis

No hadith should be studied in isolation. Instead, scholars compare hadiths to:

- Identify internal consistency within a narration
- Ensure alignment with other authentic hadiths

- Clarify whether different hadiths complement, specify, or restrict one another

For instance, one narration might state that performing Witr prayer is obligatory, while another states that it is recommended. By analyzing multiple narrations together, scholars conclude that it is highly emphasized but not obligatory.

Conclusion

Ilm al-Dirāyah is a critical science that ensures hadiths are properly understood, authenticated, and applied. It is not solely about grading chains but about ensuring content accuracy. The Qur'an is the ultimate criterion, and reason, historical context, linguistic analysis, and comparative study play essential roles in verifying hadith authenticity.

This science complements 'Ilm al-Rijāl, which deals with the reliability of narrators, and in the next chapter, we will explore how scholars evaluate chains of transmission to determine whether narrators were truthful, weak, or fabricators.

By applying Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth, scholars uphold the integrity of Islamic teachings, preserving the Prophet's (PBUH) and the Imams' (A.S) words in their true essence.

Chapter 4: Understanding Ilm al Rijal: The science of Narrators

What is 'Ilm al-Rijāl?

'Ilm al-Rijāl (the Science of Narrators) is a field of study that investigates the reliability of the people who transmitted hadith (narrations). It helps us determine whether a narration can be trusted or not based on the people in its chain (sanad). This science looks at each narrator's honesty, sect, and accuracy in transmission. To explain 'Ilm al-Rijāl (the Science of Narrators) in an easy way, let's consider a famous narration where *Zurarah ibn A'yan* asked Imam al-Baqir (عليه السلام) about two conflicting hadiths. The Imam provided a step-by-step method to resolve the contradiction, which can also help us understand how hadith authenticity is assessed.

In a hadith of [Bihar Al Anwar, Vol 2, page 245](#) we Read:

Zurarah asked:

"What should I do if I receive two conflicting hadiths from you?"

The Imam (عليه السلام) replied:

1. **Follow what is well-known among your fellow believers** – If one narration is more widely accepted and recognized, take that and ignore the rare or unknown one.
2. **Choose the hadith narrated by the more trustworthy and just person** – If both hadiths are equally well-known, rely on the one transmitted by narrators who are more reliable.
3. **Reject the hadith that aligns with the views of the general public (Ahl al-Sunnah)** – If both narrators are equally trustworthy, avoid the hadith that agrees with mainstream Sunni beliefs and take the one that differs.
4. **Follow the hadith that promotes caution (ihtiyāt) in religious matters** – If both hadiths either align or contradict the general public, take the one that encourages safety in religious practice.
5. **If all else fails, you may choose either hadith** – If the previous steps do not provide clarity, you can follow either narration until you have direct guidance from an Imam.

Why Do We Need ‘Ilm al-Rijāl?

Not every hadith is authentic. Some narrators in history were unreliable due to dishonesty, bias, or poor memory. If we accept all hadith without verification, we risk following misinformation. However, as Imam al-Bāqir (عليه السلام) explained to Zurarah, hadith authentication does not rely solely on the narrators' reliability but also on factors such as widespread acceptance, opposition to adversaries' beliefs, and alignment with religious caution (ihtiyāt). This shows that ‘Ilm al-Rijāl is just one of several tools in hadith verification.

‘Ilm al-Rijāl as a Secondary Tool

The hadith of Zurarah highlights that ‘Ilm al-Rijāl is not the primary means of verifying hadith authenticity. Instead, it is a supporting tool within a broader methodology (Ilm al-Diraya). The narration presents a hierarchical approach to resolving conflicting hadith, demonstrating that the primary focus is on the content and alignment with principles of faith rather than solely on the sanad (chain of narrators). The main focus should always be on *Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth* (the study of hadith content and meaning), ensuring that a narration aligns with the Qur'an, logic, and established principles of faith.

Steps for Evaluating Conflicting Hadiths (Based on Zurarah's Narration)

1. **Widespread Acceptance:** If one narration is more widely known and accepted among the Shia, it is preferred over an obscure or rare report.
2. **Reliability of the Narrators:** If both hadiths are widely accepted, preference is given to the one transmitted by more trustworthy and just narrators.
3. **Contradiction with Adversaries:** If both narrations have equally reliable chains, the one that differs from the beliefs of adversaries (Ahl al-Sunnah) is preferred.
4. **Religious Caution (Ihtiyāt):** If both narrations either align or contradict adversaries' views, the one that promotes religious caution should be followed.
5. **Personal Choice:** If all other criteria fail, one may choose either narration until guidance from an Imam is available.

Categories of Hadith Grading in ‘Ilm al-Rijāl

Although our main concern is not ‘Ilm al-Rijāl, it is useful to understand how hadith are classified based on their chains:

1. **Ṣaḥīḥ (Authentic)** – All narrators are Twelver Shia, just (‘ādil), and precise (ḍābiṭ).
2. **Ḥasan (Good)** – Narrators are trustworthy (thiqa), but at least one is not explicitly just (‘ādil).
3. **Muwaththaq (Reliable but Non-Shia)** – Narrators are trustworthy but belong to non-Twelver sects.
4. **Ḍa‘īf (Weak)** – Contains unknown, weak, or accused narrators.
5. **Mursal (Disconnected)** – One or more missing narrators in the chain.
6. **Maqtū‘ (Stopped)** – Chain ends at a Tabi‘i, not an infallible Imam.
7. **Mawqūf (Suspended)** – Stops at a companion, not attributed to Prophet or Imam.
8. **Mudṭarib (Conflicting)** – Contradictory versions exist.
9. **Shaadhah (Isolated or Rare)** – Contradicts stronger narrations.
10. **Mudraj (Contaminated)** – Later narrators added words not originally in the hadith.
11. **Maqlūb (Inverted)** – Names swapped or phrases misordered.
12. **Musahhaf (Altered by Spelling Mistakes)** – Errors due to copyist mistakes.
13. **Muhmal (Neglected)** – Narrator exists but has no reliability assessment.
14. **Mawḍū‘ (Fabricated)** – Proven to be falsely attributed.

The Relationship Between Sanad and Meaning

A hadith with a weak sanad does not always mean it should be rejected, and a strong sanad does not always mean it should be accepted. Scholars first examine the *meaning* (dirāyat al-ḥadīth). If the hadith aligns with the Qur’an, logic, and other authentic narrations, it may still be reliable even if its chain is weak. Likewise, a hadith with a strong chain can still be questioned if its content is problematic.

Conclusion

'Ilm al-Rijāl is an essential but secondary tool in hadith analysis. The primary method of verification is *Dirāyat al-Ḥadīth*, which examines the meaning and consistency of a narration. A balanced approach ensures that we neither accept nor reject hadith solely based on their chains but evaluate them holistically for their authenticity and relevance.