

The Methodology of Jurists in Authenticating Narrations

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Shī‘ī scholars possess a correct and objective method of authenticating narrations from Prophet Muḥammad and his family. By way of several examples, that prove the infallibility of the Imams, the importance of the Twelfth Imam in Sunnī and Shī‘ī narrations, and mistakes found in Sunnī literature regarding Shī‘ī narrations, this article proves that the Twelver Shī‘a can correctly claim legitimacy of their narrations. This work also demonstrates how contemporary Shī‘ī scholars such as Ayatollah al-Sistani continue to prove and disprove ḥadīth based on their own scientific methods.

KEYWORDS: *Ilm al-Rijāl*, Ḥadīth, Reliability, Accuracy, Fabrication,

Introduction

Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification.²

This article discusses how Twelver Shī‘ī scholars prove the authenticity of traditions (*ahadīth*). The infallible Sunna, which refers to those traditions from Prophet Muḥammad and the infallible Imams, are binding sources of moral authority on all Muslims.

The Ahl al-Bayt clarify the meaning of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an,

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² Q 33:33.

God has said: "We have sent down the reminder to you so that you may clarify for the people that which has been sent down to them, so that they may reflect."³ and "It is He who sent to the unlettered [people] an apostle from among themselves, to recite to them His signs, to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error."⁴

The Prophet said: "I leave among you two weighty treasures which, if you cling to them, you shall not be led into error after me. One of them is greater than the other: the book of God [the Qur'an], which is a rope stretched from heaven to Earth, and [the second one is] my progeny, my Ahl al-Bayt. These two shall not be parted until they return to the pool of abundance (*kawthar*) in paradise."

The Qur'an and ḥadīth prove that the relationship of the Prophet's household to the Qur'an is that of an explainer, interpreter, and elaborator. The words of the Ahl al-Bayt are sources of moral authority in the same manner as the verses of the Qur'an. The ḥadīths narrated from the Ahl al-Bayt are of two kinds: those whose attribution is certain and those whose attribution is probable. The certainty of the first group is established by successive narration (*tawātūr*), which means that the tradition is transmitted in every generation by so many narrators that it is certain that they could not have conspired to tell a lie.

An example of this is the narration of al-Ghadīr. Also of this kind are traditions whose context gives scholars confidence that the tradition is authentic in its attribution. For example, when Prophet Muḥammad said: "There is no harm or occasioning of harm for any believer." Taking into account the context of this tradition, it is likely to have been said by the Prophet.

As for traditions of probable attribution, these are also of two types: those whose authenticity has been established on the basis of reliable evidence, such as the saying of the Prophet: "Al-Hasan and al-Husayn

³ Q 16:44.

⁴ Q 62:2.

are the chiefs of the youth of paradise," and those traditions whose authenticity has not been reliably established, but which are attributed to the Prophet, such as the saying: "Do not limit your children to your manners, for they were created for a time different to yours."

Regardless of whether these traditions are attributed to the Prophet or the Ahl al-Bayt, the first people to record traditions in writing were the Ahl al-Bayt. Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Shahrāshūb al-Sarawī al-Māzandarānī (d. 588/1192) mentions in his book, *Ma'ālim al-'ulamā' fī fihrist kutub al-shī'a wa asmā' al-muṣannifīn qadīman wa ḥadīthan*, that the first person to write ḥadīth was Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalib (d. 41/661), then Salmān al-Fārsī (d. 33/653), then Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī al-Kinānī (d. 32/652), then Imam al-Sajjād (d. 95/713) through *Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya* and (*Risālat al-ḥuquq*) and other ḥadīths, then Imam al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) in the 400 sources (*uṣūl*).

In his *al-Mu'tabar*, Abū l-Qāsim Ja'far b. Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā b. Sa'īd al-Ḥillī (d. 676/1277) writes that the answers Imam al-Ṣādiq gave to questions he was asked were written down in books and these became the 400 sources. And in his *Muhaj al-da'awāt*, Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 665/1266) writes that a group of the close companions of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 183/799), his family, and his followers would attend his gatherings with writing implements, so that if Imam al-Kāẓim uttered a word or gave a legal ruling on an issue, the people wrote down what they heard from him. Therefore, the practice of writing down traditions was well-established in the time of the infallible Imams.

This was an introduction. As for the main discussions, there are a number of topics for us to cover:

Fabrication

On the phenomenon of fabrication within the traditions attributed to Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632) and his household, this contains several points. First, one must ask when the idea of fabrication was first identified with regard to the ḥadīths of Prophet Muḥammad and the ḥadīths of the Ahl al-Bayt; regarding this, Yūnus b. 'Abd al-Rahmān

transmits the following narrative:

Muhammad b. ‘Isā b. ‘Ubayd narrates: “Some of our companions asked [the companion of Imam al-Riḍā] Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān in my presence: ‘O Abū Muhammad, what made you so stringent about the traditions such that you deny much of what our colleagues narrate? What causes you to reject the traditions?’ He responded: ‘Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. circa 2nd/8th century) told me that he heard Abū ‘Abdullāh [Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq] say: ‘Do not accept a ḥadīth from us unless it agrees with the Qur’ān and the Sunna, or you find it corroborated in our earlier ḥadīth or from the ḥadīths of the forebears, because al-Mughīra b. Sa‘id – may God curse him – inserted fabrications into my father’s companions’ books [meaning the companions of Imam al-Bāqir] ḥadīths that my father did not narrate. So be wary of God, and do not narrate anything from us that is contrary to the Qur’ān or the Sunna of our Prophet, may God bless him and his family.’”⁵

This narration establishes that fabrications were inserted into the books of the companions of Imam al-Bāqir (d. 126/743), and that Imam al-Ṣādiq was aware of this. Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān says:

I came to Iraq and found in it some of the companions of Abū Ja‘far al-Bāqir, and I found many companions of Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ṣādiq, so I heard traditions from them and received their books. Later, I presented these to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Riḍā and he rejected many traditions that purported to be from Abū ‘Abdullāh, and he said to me: ‘Abū l-Khaṭṭāb lied about Abū ‘Abdullāh; may God curse Abū l-Khaṭṭāb!’⁶

From this, we know that the fabrication of traditions took place, and that the Imams – including Imam al-Ṣādiq and Imam al-Riḍā – were aware of this phenomenon and fought against it. In fact, the books of

⁵ Al-Kashshī, Muhammad b. ‘Umar, *Ikhtiyār ma‘rifat al-rijāl* (*Rijāl al-Kashshī*) (Mashhad University Press: 1988, v. 1, p. 224).

⁶ *Ibid.*

the companions of Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Ṣādiq were shown to Imam al-Riḍā, and he ordered that they be edited and the fabricated traditions be removed. The Imam told Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān: “And the companions of Abū l-Khaṭṭāb are still fabricating traditions down to the present day and inserting them into the books of the companions of Imam al-Ṣādiq, so do not accept anything purportedly from us that is contrary to the Qur’ān.”⁷

Sometimes, the fabrication takes place in the book of traditions itself. An example is with the Cairo edition of Shaykh al-Ṭabarsī (*Makārim al-akhlāq*). The author is Shī‘ī and the book is Shī‘ī, and the author narrated from Imam al-Ḥasan. However, in the Egyptian edition, the book was altered in such a manner that the editor changed the name of the transmitter from Imam al-Ḥasan to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728)! This made it seem as though the traditions in the book were from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, when in fact they were from Imam al-Ḥasan.

What are the reasons for the fabrication of traditions? In the transcript of Grand Ayatollah Al-Sayyid ‘Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Sistānī’s (b. 1930) lectures, titled *Conflicts Between Evidences* (*Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla*), which addresses and analyses the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt, he addresses the reasons for their emanation from an Infallible, the reasons for differences between them, the phenomenon of fabrication, and he discusses different factors that affect them. This book discusses the reasons for the fabrication of traditions in its first section.⁸

One of the most important reasons for fabrication is racial chauvinism. Racial chauvinism favours a particular people against another particular people. For example, the following tradition is narrated from Imam al-Ṣādiq: “Do not mix with the Kurds, for the Kurds are a group of the jinn whom God pulled back the veil of the unseen.”⁹ Even though this narration has an authentic chain according to some

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Al-Sistānī, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 183.

⁹ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1387 SH), v. 5, p. 158, h. 2.

standards, Ayatollah al-Sistani says this is a fabricated tradition because it discriminates against human beings on the basis of race, and such discrimination is incompatible with the spirit of the Qur'an and Sunna.¹⁰

The second reason for fabrication is to destroy the foundations of Islam. Consider the following tradition cited by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 380/991) in *Ma'ānī al-akhbār* with a reliable chain of narrators on the authority of Fudayl b. 'Uthmān, that says Abū 'Abdullāh al-Ṣādiq was asked about a tradition narrated from his father, Imam al-Bāqir: "If you know ..." – meaning "if you know the Ahl al-Bayt" – "... then do as you please." So whether you do good deeds or commit sins, it does not matter, as long as you know the Ahl al-Bayt! "And that they permit all forbidden things after that." So Imam al-Ṣādiq said: "What is wrong with them? May God curse them! What my father said, if you know him, then you do whatever 'good deeds' you please and it will be accepted from you." So, he did not say "do as you please", he said do whatever good you please and it will be accepted from you.¹¹

Here, Imam al-Ṣādiq addresses the phenomenon of fabrication by people looking to destroy the foundations of Islam by promoting the idea that knowing God and the Ahl al-Bayt means that a person does not need to behave righteously.

Another reason for fabrication is in order to revive pre-Islamic practices. For example, Shaykh al-Ṣadūq mentions in the first section of his book that there are narrations that show signs of this kind of fabrication. For example, there is a tradition that Shaykh al-Ṣadūq narrates in *Sharā'i'* that indicates that camel meat is forbidden to consume. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq comments on this, saying: "I do not allow this tradition to be narrated because it is impossible, meaning prohibiting camel meat is not in line with the ḥadīths of the Ahl al-Bayt. It seems that this was borrowed from Judaism, because Jews forbid the eating of camel meat because a camel is used for transportation." There is a

¹⁰ Al-Sistani, *Ta'arud al-adilla* (Ismā'īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 442.

¹¹ Ibn Bābawayh, Muḥammad b. 'Alī, *Ma'ānī al-akhbār* (Dār al Ma'rifa), v. 1, p. 181.

narration about the impurity of the sweat of a person in the state of *janāba* (ritual impurity) from illicit intercourse. Ayatollah al-Sistani says it is likely that this is fabricated because the sweat of the *junub* (a person in the state of *janāba*) from illicit intercourse is not impure, even if the act itself is forbidden; yes, the *junub* must bathe, but the sweat is not impure if it comes into contact with the body or with clothing. Ayatollah al-Sistani says: “It is not unlikely that this narration is fabricated, given that in Judaism the sweat of the *junub* person is impure.”¹²

Ayatollah al-Sistani identifies several methods of fabrication, such as attributing a book to the Imams that is not theirs. For example, the *Kitāb al-īlāl* of Abū Muḥammad Faḍl b. Shādhān b. Khalīl al-Azdī al-Nīshābūrī (d. 260/873-4) was attributed to Imam al-Riḍā and accepted by some scholars. However, Ayatollah al-Sistani says this is not a book by Imam al-Riḍā but actually the work of Faḍl b. Shādhān. Faḍl b. Shādhān was not alive at the time of Imam al-Riḍā. In fact, he was not even born during the lifetime of Imam al-Riḍā; he is counted amongst the companions of the Imams ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Hādī (d. 254/868) and Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad (d. 260/874), or even amongst the companions of Imam Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Jawād (d. 220/835).

Another example can be found in the book attributed to Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilālī al-Āmirī (d. circa 714), but who is said to have entrusted it to Ābān b. Abī ‘Ayyāsh (d. circa 8th century). This was mentioned by Ibn al-Ghaḍā’irī in his biographical work of scholars (*Rijāl*). Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nū’mān al-‘Ukbarī al-Baghdādī, known as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022), states in his *Taṣḥīḥ al-i‘tiqādāt al-imāmiyya* that “the book itself is not trustworthy, as there are insertions that have been added to it. However, the overall content from what has been narrated from “Abū Ja‘far [Shaykh al-Ṣadūq] from the book of Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilālī via Ābān b. Abī ‘Ayyāsh, the

¹² Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 449.

meaning is correct.”¹³

Reliability

Given these discussions on fabrications, one might question the reliability of *al-Kāfi*, *Man lā Man lā yahduru hu al-faqīh*, and *al-Istibṣār*. How do we rely on books of ḥadīth when the existence of these fabrications is established? The Imams and their companions undertook the process of critically examining ḥadīths since the time of the Imams, as did the generation of scholars who lived during the Minor Occultation (260/874 to 329/941), and those who followed them during the era of the Major Occultation (349/941 to the present era), and this took place in several stages. The first stage was presenting books of ḥadīth to the Imams and writing them in the time of the Infallibles, under the supervision of the Imams themselves. Ayatollah al-Sistani:¹⁴ “According to al-Najāshī, the book of ‘Ubaydullāh b. ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī was presented to Imam al-Ṣādiq who approved it and said: ‘These people have no book like this in jurisprudence!’”¹⁵ Meaning that the non-Shī‘īs did not have such a book in jurisprudence.”

Also note the narration that we cited earlier, when Yūnus b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān presented the books of the companions of Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Ṣādiq to Imam al-Ridā, and he rejected their ḥadīths, meaning that he told Yūnus to revise them and removed the unreliable material from them. This is why Yūnus was very strict in his criteria for accepting traditions, which is why someone asked him: “O Abū Muḥammad, what made you so stringent about the traditions, such that you deny much of what our colleagues narrate? What causes you to reject the traditions?”¹⁶

Another example in this regard: just as the book of Yūnus and the book of al-Ḥalabī were presented to the Imams, there are other

¹³ Mufid, *Taṣḥīḥ al-i’tiqādāt al-imāmiyya*, p. 149.

¹⁴ Al-Sistani, *Ta’āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 119.

¹⁵ *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, p. 231.

¹⁶ *Rijāl al-Kashshāf*, v. 1, p. 224.

examples of books being presented to the Imams. The book of *Fadl b. Shādhān* was presented to Imam al-‘Askarī, brought to him by a man from Nishāpūr, as mentioned by Kashshī in his *Rijāl*. The books of *Ibn Abī ‘Uzāqīr*, which were full of traditions, were presented to Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ al-Nawbakhtī. This means the books of traditions were compiled under the supervisions of the Imams or their representatives. In fact, the traditions were first written down under the supervision of the Imams. I will mention some examples from the work of Ayatollah al-Sistani¹⁷:

Ibn Bukayr narrates: “Zurāra visited Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ṣādiq and said: ‘You told us the time of *zuhr* and *‘aṣr* prayers was a cubit or two cubits [meaning that if the shadow was one cubit in length, it was the beginning of *zuhr*, and if it became two cubits, it was the beginning of *‘aṣr*]. Then you said to stay cool in summer, so how do we do that?’ Then he [Zurāra] opened his notebook to write down what he [Imam al-Ṣādiq] said.”¹⁸

In his *Mu’tabar* narration, Sa‘īd b. Yasar says: “I asked Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ṣādiq about whether it was permissible to exchange one camel for two, whether immediately or as a *nasī‘a* (postponed payment). He said: ‘There is no problem, so long as you refer to it in terms of its age, such as two camels which have completed four years or two camels which have completed five years [in return for one camel as valuable as the two]. Then he told me to delete the word *nasī‘a* from my book.”¹⁹ This also shows that the book was written under the supervision of the Imam.²⁰

It is also transmitted from ‘Umar b. ‘Uyayna: “I said to Zurāra: ‘People narrate to me from al-Ṣādiq and his father about things of religious

¹⁷ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 199.

¹⁸ Al-Ḥurr al-‘Āmilī, Muhammad b. Ḥasan, *Wasā'il al-shī‘a* (Āl al-Bayt Institute: 1995), v. 4, p. 149.

¹⁹ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1387 SH), v. 5, p. 191.

²⁰ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 199.

obligations [distribution of inheritance] that I will show to you ...”²¹ In other words, ‘Umar b. ‘Uyayna showed the ḥadīths to Zurāra, who was one of the closest companions of Imam al-Ṣādiq. He continued: “... so that you can tell me which of these narrations are true and which are false, so that I do not narrate them.”^{22, 23} Hence, this work was produced under the supervision of Zurāra b. A‘yan.

Then, companions of the Imams wrote books. Ibn Abī ‘Umayr wrote a book titled, “*Ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth*” (Differences in ḥadīths) as al-Najāshī reports. Then Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Barqī wrote a book also titled “*Ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth*”, as is recorded in Shaykh al-Ṭūsī’s *Fihrist*. ‘Abdullāh b. Ja‘far al-Ḥimyārī wrote a work titled, “*Al-Ḥadīthān al-mukhtalifān*” (Divergent Traditions). Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Dāwūd, a contemporary of Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. Qūlūwayh, wrote a book with the same name. And Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Wahīd b. ‘Ubdūn, the teacher of both al-Ṭūsī and al-Najāshī, another work on “divergent traditions”. This means that all of these books were written on the subject of ḥadīth and they gathered contradictory ḥadīths in order to distinguish one from the other. This was the practice of the narrators of the teachings of the Prophet’s household.²⁴

This is the first stage; now for the second stage.

The Strict Approach Towards Tolerant Narrators

For any narrator who was tolerant, the scholars would take a strict approach towards him. Consider what narrators mention from Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Isā al-Ash‘arī. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Isā al-Ash‘arī was a leader in the holy city of Qom. However, he did not tolerate any tolerant narrator of traditions from the Ahl al-Bayt, meaning a narrator who narrates traditions from weak narrators, and would banish them

²¹ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, v. 7, p. 98.

²² Ibid.v. 7 p. 98 (noorlib.ir).

²³ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 200.

²⁴ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, pp. 203-4.

from the city. He expelled Sahl b. Ziyād and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Barqī because they narrated traditions from weak narrators. Likewise, Shaykh Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Walīd, the teacher of al-Ṣadūq, rejected many traditions from Nawādir al-ḥikma, a well-known book by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī. He rejected many traditions from this book because he did not consider them to be proven to be valid or correct. All of this is evidence of the strictness in accepting ḥadīth in the time of the Imams themselves, as Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Īsā was a contemporary of Imams al-Hādī and al-‘Askarī.

Now let us come to the third stage.

Accuracy in Investigating ḥadīth by Notable Scholars of ḥadīth

We shall now look at the investigations of Shaykh al-Kulaynī in *al-Kāfi*, Shaykh al-Ṣadūq in *Man lā yaḥduru hu al-faqīh*, and Shaykh al-Ṭūsī in *al-Tahdhīb* and *al-Istibṣār*.

This is what Shaykh al-Kulaynī says in the introduction to *al-Kāfi*: You would like to have a sufficing book, in which is gathered all the arts of the knowledge of religion, with which the student will suffice, to which one seeking guidance can refer, and from which the one who wants the knowledge of religion can obtain said knowledge and act upon it, based on authentic traditions according to the truthful.²⁵

In other words, he has compiled what he considers to be authentic traditions. But this is his own view, and other jurists might disagree. However, it shows he was careful in his investigation of authentic traditions.

Shaykh al-Ṣadūq says in the introduction to *Man lā yaḥduru hu al-faqīh*:

In this work, my goal was not to compile everything that narrators

²⁵ *Ibid.* v. 1, p. 24.

narrate, but to compile that upon whose basis I issue legal rulings and deem to be authentic, and I believe that it is an established *hujja* between myself and my Lord.²⁶

This shows al-Ṣadūq's strictness in his criteria for accepting traditions and distinguishing authentic traditions from others. And in relation to Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, he writes in his *Kitāb ʿuddat al-uṣūl*:

The verified sect was unanimous, for we found they unanimously agreed to act upon the reports that they narrated in their books of ḥadīth and recorded in their notebooks. There is no disagreement or quarrel about this amongst them, so that if one of them brings a tradition that is unknown, they ask where it came from.²⁷

This was the practice of all the jurists of the Ahl al-Bayt. "If he referred them to a well-known book or a well-known source, and its narrator was reliable ..." So first, a well-known book, and second a trustworthy narrator, "... they would not reject the tradition. They would accept his narration." All of this demonstrates their rigour with regards to validating traditions.

Now we come to the fourth stage.

The Foundation of *ilm al-rijāl* (the Science of Narrators) to Distinguish Between Narrators of ḥadīth

Al-Kashshī wrote a book of *rijāl*. Al-Najāshī wrote a book of *rijāl*. The *Fihrist* of Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, the *Rijāl* of al-Barqī, the treatise of Abū Ghālib al-Zurārī, the *Mashyikha* of al-Ṣadūq, the *Mashyikha* of al-Ṭūsī, the *Fihrist* of Muntajab al-Dīn, the *Maʿalim al-‘ulamā'* of Ibn Shahrāshūb, the *Rijāl* of Ibn Dāwūd, *Khulasāt al-aqwāl* ... are all works in this category. Amongst the modern scholars there is Sayyid al-Khoei's *Encyclopaedia of ḥadīth Narrators* that is 23 volumes in length, and the *Kitāb qabasāt* of Sayyid Muḥammad Riḍā al-Sistāni, in which he mentions the theories

²⁶ Ibn Bābawayh, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Bābawayh al-Qummī, *Man lā yahduruhu al-faqīh* (Jāmī‘a Mudarrisīn: 1993), v. 1, p. 2.

²⁷ Al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. Ḥasan, *Uddat al-Uṣūl* (n.d.), v. 1, p. 126.

of his father, Ayatollah al-Sistani.

All of these were written in the field of the science of narrators in order to distinguish the narrators in terms of their reliability, their accuracy, and whether it was possible to accept traditions from them. There is also the science of *tabaqāt* (biographical dictionaries), which identifies the generation to which a particular narrator belongs: first, second, or third, because distinguishing between different generations of narrators can help distinguish narrators with shared names.

For example, when we come across the name “Abū Basīr”, this name is shared between a number of narrators. Therefore, knowledge of *tabaqāt* allows scholars to distinguish Abū Baṣīr al-Murādī from Abū Baṣīr al-Bukhtūrī, and the reliable Abū Baṣīr from the unreliable Abū Baṣīr. We must study the *tabaqāt* to be able to make this distinction, and it is known as the science of *tabaqāt*.

Another effort of the scholars is the careful analysis of narrations with an incomplete chain (*mursal* ḥadīths). There are some *mursal* traditions that can be accepted, such as those of the Three Shaykhs: Ibn Abī ‘Umayr, Aḥmad b. Abī Naṣr al-Bazānṭī, and Ṣafwān b. Yaḥyā, because these three were strict in only narrating from reliable sources. Some of our scholars even accept the *mursal* traditions of al-Ṣadūq where he says “He said: ‘Imam al-Ṣādiq said: ...’” They accept it because al-Ṣadūq only uses this expression when he is certain of the tradition’s authenticity.

We now move onto the third and final topic: developing the method of authenticating and accepting ḥadīth.

Methodological Development

Has an approach in authenticating and accepting ḥadīth developed amongst our modern-day scholars? Yes! Among the most prominent who developed the current approach in accepting, classifying, and authenticating ḥadīth is Ayatollah al-Sistani, as is evident in his books and in the dictations taken from his lectures.

His approach is based on several pillars, in that in addition to what the scholars have mentioned about the science of narrators, and in addition to what the scholars have mentioned in the science of generations, and in addition to what the scholars have mentioned in general, he identifies other pillars.

The first pillar is looking at differences in manuscripts. It is necessary to study not just the printed books of traditions, but the manuscripts themselves, as the original texts were not printed, but rather copied by hand. Therefore, we must read all of their original manuscripts to classify the ḥadīth accurately and know their text.

In his book, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla wa ikhtilāf al-ḥadīth*, he says: “Al-Majlisī transmits this narration on the authority of Ammār b. Marwān: ‘I heard Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ṣādiq say about whatever is brought out of minerals, the sea, booty, and licit mixed with illicit property is forbidden if the owner is not known, and the five treasures.’” Ayatollah al-Sistani says: “Al-Majlisī transmitted it in *Bihār* without mentioning the word ‘halāl’ mixed with the forbidden, and this is also the case in several editions of the book *al-Khiṣāl* by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq. They are printed without this additional word. Meanwhile, when we refer to other manuscripts we find that this word exists, and this means there are differences between manuscripts, so it is necessary to scrutinise this.”²⁸

The second pillar is *idrāj*. At times, some scholars include their interpretation of the ḥadīth within the ḥadīth, and those who come after them think this is part of the ḥadīth when it is not. Therefore, the jurist must have a great deal of experience to distinguish the cases of insertion from others. This is what Ayatollah al-Sistani focuses on in his analysis of traditions. For example, in this authentic tradition from Imam al-Ṣādiq, Zurāra asks: “On whom is the Friday prayer obligatory?” He said: “It is obligatory for seven Muslims, and no Friday prayer for a group of less than five Muslims, one of whom is the imam.” Then he adds the sentence: “Then if seven meet and they are not afraid, one of

²⁸ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 467.

them leads the rest in prayer and delivers the Friday sermons.” This last phrase, “then if seven meet and they are not afraid” is al-Ṣadūq’s explanation of the tradition. However, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Bihbahānī (d. 1205/1791), the author of *Miftāh al-karāma*, and Sayyid Ḥusayn Burūjardī Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1380/1961), have called attention to the fact that this is something al-Ṣadūq has said that is not part of the narration.²⁹

The third pillar is looking at ambiguities in handwriting. Narrations were originally written by hand. Sometimes the style of handwriting can mean that one word looks like another, and this leads to confusion about the narration. So, the jurist must pay close attention to the writing style of manuscripts. Ayatollah al-Sistāni mentions in his book that there is a narration from ‘Ubayd b. Zurāra in which he says that the one offering prayers can recommence his recitation as long as he has not reached up to two-thirds of it, meaning that the worshipper, when he begins reciting a sura after *al-Fātiḥa*, can restart his recitation if he has not read two-thirds of the sura in question. However, on examining the manuscripts it becomes clear that “two-thirds” contains an addition, and it should read “one-third”.³⁰ This is something that can only be identified by paying close attention to the handwriting of manuscripts.

Paying Attention to Context; how do we Check the Context of a Tradition?

For example, when we look at the authentic narration of Ibn Abī Bukayr, he says Zurāra asked Abū ‘Abdullāh about praying while wearing the fur of foxes, squirrels, and other fur, so he produced a book claiming that it was the dictation of the Messenger of God. Imam al-Ṣādiq brought out this book, and it said: “Prayer wearing any fur of an animal forbidden to be eaten, and its hair, its hide, and any other part of it is invalid.”

Ayatollah al-Sistāni says that many scholars read the narration in this way, but in fact the context gives a different meaning, namely that

²⁹ Ibid., v. 1, p. 432.

³⁰ Ibid., v. 1, p. 472.

it says: Prayer wearing anything with fur is invalid, not simply anything that is forbidden to be eaten. Some of those creatures that are forbidden to eat have no fur, meaning they have no feathers or hair, such as a snake or lizard. So, in its proper context, the narration says that praying in the hair, fur, or hide or anything else from an animal with fur that is forbidden to eat renders the prayer invalid.³¹

Ayatollah al-Sistani classifies³² the ḥadīths into two categories: ḥadīths of teaching and ḥadīths of legal rulings. He says the ḥadīths of the Ahl al-Bayt are not in a single format. Some are issued in the context of teaching and others in the context of legal opinions. So, we must distinguish between different traditions according to their genre, and this plays a role both in the acceptance of traditions as valid and in issuing legal rulings on their basis. What does it mean to say something was issued in the context of teaching? It means in the context of teaching general principles that Ayatollah al-Sistani mentions, where he says it was reported from Imam al-Ṣādiq: "We give you the fundamentals and it is up to you to derive specific rulings from them." It was also narrated from him: "If you doubt after certainty, then continue on the basis of certainty." The narrator asked: "Is this a principle?" He said: "Yes." Sometimes the Imams provide general principles for their companions from which to derive specific rulings. This is the meaning of "in the context teaching". And it is distinct from those traditions which were issued in order to provide legal rulings.

What is the meaning of legal rulings? It means that the Imam provides a specific directive to the questioner. This is in the same manner as jurists answer legal questions today. He does not provide a general rule from which people can derive specific rules. For example, see the following noble narration:

A man asked Abū ‘Abdullāh, that he had gone to his wife before completing the *tawāf al-nisa'*. The Imam said he must give a camel

³¹ Al-Sistani, *Ta‘āruḍ al-adilla* (Ismā‘īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 478.

³² *Ibid.*, v. 1, pp. 224-8.

as expiation. Another man came and asked, and he said a cow. A third came and asked, he said a sheep. The narrator stood up and said: "God set you aright, to the first you said a camel, to the second a cow, and to the third a sheep!" The Imam replied: "Yes. The first was wealthy, so he must give a camel. The second was middling, so he must give a cow. The third was poor, so he must give a sheep!"

So, the Imam does not give a general ruling, but answers each according to his circumstances. This is what we call a legal ruling narration, so it is necessary to distinguish between the two kinds.³³

The sixth pillar: studying the environment of the narration. Ayatollah al-Sistani says that we must study the environment of the narration, namely in what kind of environment was it issued; hence, we study the time and place in which the narration originated. This is what is called the social atmosphere of the tradition. This is necessary because we cannot fully understand the narration's meaning and significance without understanding the specific social setting in which it arose.

For example, when Ayatollah al-Sistani mentions the narrations of doing the *ziyāra* of Imam al-Ḥusayn, which recommend the *ziyāra* in Rajab or Sha'bān, he says that these narrations were uttered in a specific atmosphere. When Imam al-Ḥusayn was killed, the Shī'a began to visit his grave from Kufa, Basra, and Yemen, in groups and individually. However, they also faced the threat of persecution, so they would go secretly at night to visit the grave of Imam al-Ḥusayn. So, these narrations were issued to encourage them and mobilise them to visit the grave of Imam al-Ḥusayn to keep his revolution and message alive.

This is studying the social environment in which these narrations of *ziyāra* emerged. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the *ziyāra* of *arbaīn*. Even if Jābir or Zaynab were not present on the fortieth day, immediately after the death of Imam al-Ḥusayn the Shī'a went individually and in groups to visit his grave. This is why these traditions encouraging the *ziyāra* of *arbaīn* emerged, in order to support the

³³ Al-Sistani, *Ta'ārud al-adilla* (Ismā'īliyān Publications: 1441 AH), v. 1, p. 432.

pilgrims already making this pilgrimage to the grave of Imam al-Husayn on foot and under the cover of darkness.³⁴

The final pillar to be discussed is the application of probability calculations to the traditions. How can we accept some ḥadīths and not others through the use of probability calculations, which is a form of evidence in the science of mathematics, which Sayyid Shahīd al-Ṣadr and Ayatollah al-Sistani discuss with regard to the classification of narrations and with regard to their authentication and identification? For example, when we want to establish the birth of Imam al-Mahdī, how do we prove that? Do we take authentic ḥadīths only? In my book, *al-Haqīqa al-mahdawiyya*, I write about using probability calculations to prove the existence of Imam al-Mahdī.

On page 70 of this book, I explain that we combine the indications of the existence of the Imam until we arrive at the level of certainty about his birth. The first indication are the narrations of the Prophet, as in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal al-Dhuhlī (d. 241/855) and other works, which say each generation, including the generation in which we live, has an appointed Imam. There is a narration in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* that Islam will ensure until the Hour sets in or you are led by twelve caliphs, all of whom are from the Quraysh. In other words, in every era there is one of these twelve individuals, and he is the successor of the Prophet in that era until the end of time. It increases the likelihood of a real successor of the Messenger in our own time right now.

There is the evidence in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. For example, the books of Ibrāhīm al-Ṣabātī, Dr Sa‘īd Ayyūb’s *al-Masīh al-dajjāl*, and Shaykh Muḥammad Fakhr al-Islām’s *Anīs al-islām* all state prophecies from the Bible, namely the verses that foretell the coming of a saviour in the Book of Joshua and in the Revelation of John. These books contain prophecies of a saviour who will purify humanity at that time. The fourth indication is the narrations that indicate the birth of Imam al-Mahdī. If we go back to the time of his birth in the year 255/869

³⁴ Al-Sistani, private gathering in Najaf, Iraq, during Arba‘īn days, November 2016.

and the beginning of his occultation in 260/874, until the end of the Minor Occultation in the year 329/940, we find that the Imam had four deputies during this period:

- ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-Asadī al-‘Amrī (d. 267/880);
- Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. ‘Uthmān (d. 304-5/917-18);
- Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ al-Nawbakhtī (d. 326/937);
- Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Samurī (d. 329/941).

If we go back to the books of major scholars, whether Shī‘ī or Sunnī, we do not find anyone who denied the birth of the Imam, or the fact that he was in occultation. Review all the history books that were written during this period and you will not find a single one who denied the birth of the Imam or his occultation. And if there is something unknown or considered false, people will hasten to deny it, especially Sunnī historians, and yet we find no Sunnī historian from this period who denies it.

And likewise Shī‘ī scholars, including Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb b. Ishqāq al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī (d. 329/941), Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. Ja‘far b. Mūsā b. Masrūr b. Qūlawayh al-Qummī (d. 368/978-9), and the father of al-Ṣadūq, reported in their books that there were frequent sightings and visions of the Imam during that period, and in fact that he issued written directives which continued to be issued for 69 years in the same handwriting. If there was no Imam behind these four ambassadors, the ambassadors would not have received these writings all in one and the same handwriting. This further confirms the birth of the Imam and his absence during that period.

The fifth indication is a clear and authentic account of his birth. ‘Abdullāh b. Jundub narrates with an authentic chain from Imam Mūsā b. Ja‘far that he used to say in his prostration of thanksgiving:

O God, I ask You and Your angels, Your prophets, Your messengers and all of Your creation, to witness that You are God my Lord, and Islam is my religion, and Muḥammad is the Prophet, and ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn, and ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, and Muḥammad b.

‘Alī, and Ja‘far b. Muḥammad, and Mūsā b. Ja‘far, and ‘Alī b. Mūsā, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, and al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, and the Ḥujja, Ibn al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī are my Imams to whom I give my loyalty and from whose enemies I disassociate.

This is an authentic narration from Imam al-Kāẓim about what he would say in his prostrations, before the birth of Imam al-Mahdī.

To this, we add a sixth indication, which is the fact that the Muslim experts on genealogy, most of whom are Sunnī, all accept his birth:

- Abū Ṣaḥr Sahl b. ‘Abdullāh al-Bukhārī (d. circa 4th/10th century) in *Sīr al-silsila al-‘alawīyya*;
- Sayyid al-‘Amrī, (d. 5th/11th century) in *al-Mujdī fī anṣāb al-ṭālibiyyīn*;
- Al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-Shāfi‘ī, a scholar of the 7th/13th century in his book *al-Shayya‘ al-mubarakā fī anṣāb al-ṭālibiyya*;
- Al-Arzaqānī from the 7th century in his book *al-Fakhrī fī anṣāb al-ṭālibiyyīn*;
- Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī, known as Ibn ‘Inaba, from the 9th/15th century in *‘Umdat al-ṭālib fī anṣāb āl Abī Ṭālib*;
- The Zaydī genealogist, Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Yamanī al-San‘anī of the scholars of the 11th/17th century, in his *Rawdāt al-bāb fī ma‘rifat al-anṣāb*;
- Muḥammad Amīn al-Suwaydī, a scholar of the 20th century in his *Sabā‘ik al-dhahab fī ma‘rifat qabā‘il al-‘arab*.

The seventh indication is that as well as these scholars of genealogy, there are several Sunnī historians who acknowledge both his birth and his occultation. These are:

- Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī (d. 631/1233) (*al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh*);
- Ibn Khallikān (d. 682/1282) (*Wafayāt al-a‘yān*);
- Al-Dhahabī (d. 749/1348) in three of his books;
- Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1348-9) in his work of history;
- Aḥmad b. Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566) (*al-Ṣawā‘iq al-*

muhriqa).

When we calculate the probabilities and combine these indications that support one other and strengthen each other's probability, we become convinced of the birth and existence of the Imam and of his occultation.³⁵

Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds. May God's prayers and peace be upon Muḥammad and his family.

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³⁵ Khabbāz, Munīr, *al-Haqīqa al-mahdawiyya* (Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Takhaṣṣuṣiyya fī l-Imām al-Mahdī (aj): 1431 AH), pp. 70-9.