

A Re-examination of the Concept of "Ṣaḥīḥ" from the Perspective of Early Hadith Scholars

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Abstract

Access to the Sunnah, as the most extensive source of religious knowledge, is achievable through authentic "Ṣaḥīḥ" traditions; therefore, it is essential to clarify how early and late Hadith scholars defined an authentic Hadith. In the terminology of later scholars, a ṣaḥīḥ hadith is defined as a report transmitted continuously to the Infallible Imam (as) through just Imami narrators. Given that early traditionists did not provide an explicit definition of this concept, their perspective must be deduced through an examination of their works. Some scholars have claimed that according to early traditionists, a ṣaḥīḥ Hadith was one whose issuance (ṣudūr) from the Infallible was known with certainty or high confidence. Adopting a descriptive-analytical method and relying on library-based sources, this study aims to verify the validity of this claim. The findings indicate that for early Hadith scholars, an authentic report was one accompanied by contextual evidence (qarā'īn) warranting reliance; however, there is no textual evidence in early Hadith compendia suggesting that they considered a report ṣaḥīḥ only if they had certainty or high confidence regarding its issuance from the Infallible. It appears that this misconception stems from conflating the indicators of issuance, indicators of textual validity, and indicators of preference. The indicators of textual validity and preference mentioned in early works are incapable of proving issuance from the Infallible. Furthermore, although the contextual indicators cited by Shaykh al-Bahā'ī may generate confidence regarding the issuance of a tradition from the Infallible, they are absent from the writings of early Hadith scholars.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The Sunnah, as the most extensive source of religious knowledge, has reached us primarily through Hadiths. Since this invaluable heritage has been exposed to numerous damages during transmission, Hadith scholars have endeavored to

distinguish authentic Hadiths from weak ones using various indicators. Consequently, the term "Ṣaḥīḥ" (authentic) has been frequently used among both early and later scholars. While there is no disagreement about the concept of "Ṣaḥīḥ" according to later scholars—defined as a report transmitted through a chain of just Imami narrators to the Infallible Imam (as)—there is no consensus regarding its meaning among the early Hadith scholars. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the concept of "Ṣaḥīḥ" among early scholars to determine the degree of validity of what has been attributed to them.

This research aims to verify that there is no evidence in early Hadith collections suggesting that "Ṣaḥīḥ" meant a report whose issuance from the Infallible was known with certainty or confidence.

Materials and Methods

This research employs a descriptive-analytical approach and utilizes library-based sources. The study examines the concept of "Ṣaḥīḥ" as understood by early Imami scholars, specifically through a detailed analysis of the major early Hadith Collections.

The research methodology involves several steps: First, a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the definition of "Ṣaḥīḥ" among early Hadith Scholars was conducted, examining both the views of later scholars (from the late 7th to early 14th century AH) and contemporary scholars (14th-15th centuries AH). Second, a systematic analysis of the primary sources was undertaken to identify instances where the term "Ṣaḥīḥ" or related concepts such as "muwaththaq bihī" (reliable/trustworthy) were used. Third, the study identified and categorized the types of evidence (qara'in) mentioned in these works, distinguishing between: (a) evidence proving the issuance (ṣudūr) of a hadith from the Infallible (as), (b) evidence indicating the correctness of the content (matn), and (c) evidence for preferring one report over another in cases of contradiction.

The study also critically examines the claims of various scholars, including Muhammad Amin al-Astarabadi who first claimed that early traditionists understood "Ṣaḥīḥ" as meaning a report whose issuance from the Infallible (as) was known with certainty.

Results and Findings

The research findings reveal several important points regarding the concept of "Ṣaḥīḥ" among early Hadith scholars:

1. A thorough examination of early Hadith collections reveals that there is no explicit definition of "Ṣaḥīḥ" in the introductions or texts of early Hadith collections.

2. Al-Kulayni's discussion in the introduction to Al-Kafi focuses on resolving contradictory hadiths. The evidence he mentions—such as conformity with the Qur'an, opposition to general Sunni views, and alignment with the consensus of Imami scholars—falls under the category of evidence for preference (tarjih) rather than evidence for proving the issuance (ṣudūr) from the Infallible (as).

3. In the introduction to Man lā Yahduruhu al-Faqīh, al-Saduq states that unlike other compilers who include everything they narrate, he only includes Hadiths he issues fatwas upon, judges to be authentic, and considers as evidence between himself and God. However, there is no evidence that "aḥkumu bi-siḥḥatihi" (I judge it to be authentic) means confidence or certainty in its issuance from the Infallible.

4. Al-Tusi, in the introduction to Al-Istibsar, divides reports into mutawatir and ahad, further dividing ahad into those accompanied by evidence and those without. He considers acting upon mutawatir reports and those accompanied by evidence as acting upon knowledge, but do not mention confidence or certainty regarding issuance from the Infallible. In his book Al-Uddah fi Uṣūl al-Fiqh, al-Tusi explicitly states that the evidence he discusses—including conformity with reason, the Qur'an, and consensus—indicate the correctness of the content of reports, but do not prove the actual truth of the reports themselves, as reports could be fabricated while still conforming to these criteria.

5. The research demonstrates a critical confusion between three types of evidence in later scholarly works:

- Evidence for Issuance (Ṣudūr): Evidence that can establish the issuance of a report from the Infallible, such as those mentioned by Shaykh al-Baha'i in Mashriq al-Shamsayn, including the existence of a report in many of the four hundred principles (uṣūl), repetition in multiple principles with reliable chains, and reports from works approved by the Imams.

- Evidence for Content Validity: Evidence that indicates the correctness of a report's content, such as conformity with the Qur'an, definitive Sunnah, reason, consensus, and the absence of contradictions.

- Evidence for Preference (Tarjih): Evidence used to prefer one report over another in cases of contradiction, such as opposition to general Sunni views.

6. Shaykh al-Baha'i's Evidence: The evidence mentioned by Shaykh al-Baha'i could, if present, create confidence in the issuance of a report from the Infallible. However, there is no trace of these types of evidence in early Hadith collections. Furthermore, Shaykh al-Baha'i himself acknowledges that these types of evidence are no longer available in his time.

Conclusion

1. Undoubtedly, for early Hadith scholars, a "Ṣaḥīḥ" Hadith was one accompanied by some evidence that warranted reliance.
2. There is no evidence in early hadith collections indicating that "Ṣaḥīḥ" meant a Hadith whose issuance from the Infallible (as) was known with confidence or certainty.
3. There has been confusion between evidence for proving issuance, evidence for content validity, and evidence for preference in some later and many contemporary works. The evidence mentioned in early works pertains to content validity and preference, which can only confirm the correctness of content or determine the preferred report in cases of contradiction, but cannot prove issuance from the Infallible.
4. The research demonstrates the importance of precision in the terminology used by early and later scholars and highlights the need for careful distinction between different types of evidence when evaluating the authenticity of hadiths.

Keywords: Sunnah, Hadith, Ṣaḥīḥ, Early Hadith Scholars.