

The Methodology of Classical Hadith Criticism and The Methodology of Common Link

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Abstract: The study of Hadīth criticism and its connection with the methodology of common link emphasises that classical Hadīth criticism involves rigorous standards, in which scholars assess the authenticity of Hadīth by analysing the chain of narrators (*isnād*) and the text (*matn*) itself. It further discusses the common link methodology, which examines the interconnectedness of narrators to determine the reliability and transmission of Hadith across different sources. This paper explores the methodologies of classical hadith criticism and the common link, focusing on their significance in Islamic studies. The purpose of this research is to investigate the methodologies of classical Hadīth criticism and the methodology of common links within the framework of Islamic studies. This research is significant for testing Western scholars' theories and providing the best understanding of how the Hadīth tradition is transmitted from the Prophet to subsequent generations. This qualitative research investigates the methodologies of classical Hadīth criticism and the methodology of common links within the framework of Islamic studies. By employing library research as the primary data collection method, the study analyses literature, including books, journals, and religious texts, to explore the intricate relationship between Hadīth and the Qur'an. In conclusion, the findings of this research shed light on the complex interplay between Hadīth, its historical context, and its methodologies. They highlight the critical role Hadīth plays in shaping Islamic thought and law, as well as the ongoing efforts to ensure its proper transmission and understanding within the Muslim community.

Keywords: Methodology, Hadīth Criticism, Common Link.

Introduction

The study of *Hadīth*, encompassing the teachings, actions, and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), constitutes a cornerstone of Islamic scholarship. This study explores the methodologies of Classical Hadīth Criticism and the Common Link, both of which are important for understanding the authenticity and transmission of *Hadīth* literature. The study employs a qualitative approach based primarily on library research. Its analysis draws on written sources, including books, journal articles, and authoritative Islamic texts such as the Qur'an and *Hadīth*, to provide a comprehensive framework for examining the complexities of *Hadīth* transmission and criticism.

Hadīth functions as an essential complement to the Qur'an by providing guidance concerning Islamic beliefs, practices, and moral values. As the second principal source of Islamic guidance, the *Sunna* explains and elaborates upon the central messages of the Qur'an. Over the centuries, the recording and preservation of *Hadīth* developed from predominantly oral transmission into increasingly systematic forms of documentation. This development reflects the dynamic character of Islamic intellectual history. Although some early Companions of the Prophet were initially reluctant to record his teachings because of concerns that they might be confused with the Qur'an, others recognized the importance of preserving them for subsequent generations.

The development of *Hadīth* scholarship consequently involved sustained scholarly efforts to distinguish reliable reports from weak or questionable transmissions. Early *Hadīth* criticism included various approaches to evaluating transmitted reports during the first centuries of Islam. By approximately the ninth century CE, a more systematic critical methodology had developed and became central to the establishment of the *Hadīth* canon. One of its principal features involved assessing the reliability of individual transmitters in order to determine the authenticity and credibility of transmitted reports (Little, 2022). Such procedures eventually formed an important component of what became known as classical *Hadīth* criticism.

Within this intellectual tradition, the analysis of transmission networks became particularly important because the reliability of a report depended not only on its content but also on the chain through which it was transmitted. The concept of the common link therefore provides an additional methodological perspective for examining the transmission and circulation of *Hadīth*. By tracing patterns within the *isnād*, this approach contributes to discussions concerning the categorization, transmission history, and validation of particular reports.

Against this background, this study focuses on three interrelated questions. First, what fundamental principles and criteria were employed in classical *Hadīth* criticism? Second, how does the common-link methodology contribute to the categorization and validation of *Hadīth*? Third, what challenges and developments influenced the evolution of *Hadīth* documentation throughout Islamic history? These questions are intended to clarify both the historical development of *Hadīth* criticism and the methodological principles through which

Muslim scholars sought to preserve the credibility of transmitted religious knowledge.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the methodologies of classical *Hadīth* criticism and the common-link approach. It examines the fundamental principles and criteria historically employed by scholars to evaluate the authenticity and reliability of *Hadīth*. It also investigates the role of the common link within *isnād* analysis and its contribution to understanding the transmission, categorization, and validation of *Hadīth*. Finally, the study examines the historical challenges and developments that influenced the documentation and preservation of *Hadīth*, including scholarly efforts to address problems of forgetting, distortion, and unreliable transmission.

By addressing these issues, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of *Hadīth* methodologies and their significance within the Islamic scholarly tradition. Particular attention is given to the ways in which classical criticism and transmission analysis contributed to the preservation of Islamic religious knowledge. In this respect, the study is expected to contribute to broader discussions concerning the transmission, authentication, and preservation of Islamic intellectual heritage.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach based primarily on library research. The research focuses on the methodologies of Classical *Hadīth* Criticism and the Common Link. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study examines concepts, historical developments, scholarly interpretations, and textual materials rather than numerical relationships or statistical patterns. Qualitative research provides a framework for examining a subject in depth through the interpretation of relevant textual and documentary sources (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

The study relies on written and documentary materials as its principal sources of data. These materials include books, scholarly journal articles, academic publications, and authoritative Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an and collections of *Hadīth*. The use of documentary sources is consistent with the nature of library research, in which relevant texts constitute the primary objects of investigation.

Data were collected by identifying, selecting, and reviewing literature directly related to classical *Hadīth* criticism, the common-link methodology, *isnād* analysis, and the historical development of *Hadīth* documentation. Relevant books, journal articles, and religious texts were examined in order to identify concepts, terminologies, historical developments, and methodological principles relevant to the research questions. Particular attention was given to sources that explain the criteria used in classical *Hadīth* criticism and the processes through which transmitted reports were evaluated and preserved.

The study adopts qualitative textual analysis to interpret the collected materials. Austin and Sutton (2014) explain that qualitative research enables researchers to develop rich descriptions and explanations of processes within identifiable contexts. Consistent with this approach, the selected literature was examined comparatively and interpretatively to identify recurring concepts, methodological patterns, and differences between classical *Hadīth* criticism and common-link analysis.

The analytical process consisted of organizing the collected literature according to the major themes of the study, examining the principles and criteria of classical *Hadīth* criticism, identifying the methodological characteristics of common-link analysis, and tracing historical developments in *Hadīth* documentation. The findings from these textual sources were then interpreted in relation to the study's research questions. Through this process, the research seeks to provide a systematic account of the methods used to authenticate, transmit, document, and preserve *Hadīth* within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

Results and Discussion

1. The *Hadīth* and Its Crucial Terminology

The term *Hadīth*, or *aḥādīth* in the plural form, refers to reports describing the words, actions, and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). *Hadīth* is closely connected to the *Sunna*, which normatively represents the legacy of the Prophet throughout Islamic history. The position of the *Sunna* is closely related to the Qur'an as the primary source of Islam because it provides broader and more detailed explanations of Qur'anic teachings through the words and practices of the Prophet. From the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, Islamic civilization developed from the seventh century onward, shaping the legal, theological, mystical, and cultural dimensions of Islam (Brown, 2007, p. 3). Researchers have also argued that the recording of *Hadīth* began much earlier than the first century A.H. and that its development can be traced back to the time of the Prophet and continued among the Companions and subsequent generations (Qaradawi, 2013, p. 434).

Allah the Almighty states in the Qur'an:

لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِن كَانُوا مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

“Certainly, Allah bestowed a great grace upon the believers, when He raised up a Messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His Signs, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book, and the Wisdom, and before this they were in apparent error.” (Qur’an 3:164; Yayasan Restu, 2008, p. 71)

According to Qaradawi (2013), *Hadīth* provides both a theoretical explanation and a practical application of the Qur’an. The Qur’an contains the fundamental principles of Islam, including beliefs, worship, morality, transactions, and etiquette, while *Hadīth* provides further guidance for implementing those principles in practice. For this reason, *Hadīth* holds an important position in Islamic life and should be followed as a source of guidance alongside the Qur’an (Qaradawi, 2013, p. 429).

Unlike the Qur’an, the codification of *Hadīth* did not occur immediately. During the early period, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) concentrated primarily on teaching and disseminating the Qur’an. A number of Companions were appointed to write Qur’anic revelations, whereas the writing of the *Sunna* was restricted. This prohibition was intended to prevent confusion between the Qur’an and the *Sunna*. In addition, the limited number of literate individuals, the scarcity of writing materials, and the difficulties involved in documentation also affected the recording process (Qaradawi, 2013, p. 433).

Abu Sa’id al-Khudri reported that the Messenger of God (PBUH) said:

“Do not write about me, and whoever writes about me anything other than the Qur’an, he should erase it. There is no blame on you relating to me, and whoever attributes a lie to me—Hammam said, ‘I thought he said’—intentionally, then he has indeed secured his place in the fire.” (Zidan & Zidan, 2002, p. 437, *Hadīth* No. 1867)

As Islam expanded, different attitudes emerged among the Companions regarding the writing of *Hadīth*. Several senior Companions, including ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ud, Zayd ibn Thabit, Abu Musa al-Anshari, and Abu Sa’id al-Khudri, were reportedly reluctant to encourage the writing of *Hadīth*. By contrast, other Companions, including ‘Ali ibn Abi Thalib, al-Hasan ibn ‘Ali, Anas ibn Malik, and ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amr al-‘As, regarded the practice as permissible (Kamali, 2009, p. 37).

During the first and second centuries of Islam, the documentation of *Hadīth* became an increasingly important concern among Muslim scholars (*‘ulama*). Their efforts were motivated by the desire to serve Islam, preserve the *Sunna*, and prevent corruption caused by errors of memory and transmission. As the chains of *isnād* became longer, details concerning names, places, and dates became more difficult for narrators to preserve accurately. Systematic documentation therefore became increasingly necessary to reduce the possibility of error and distortion (Kamali, 2009, p. 39).

Several renowned Companions and early transmitters are known to have documented sayings and reports attributed to the Prophet. Sa’d ibn ‘Ubada reportedly possessed a *Ṣaḥīfa* collection, from which his son later narrated *Hadīth*. ‘Abd Allah ibn Abi Awfa also compiled material in his own handwriting, and people reportedly consulted his manuscript and discussed its contents with him for verification. Samura ibn Jundub (d. 60 H) likewise produced written material that was later inherited by his son Sulayman. Muhammad ibn Sirin (d. 110 H) reportedly commented that the epistle transmitted by Samura to his son contained a great deal of knowledge (Kamali, 2009, p. 39).

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab reportedly considered documenting the *Sunna*. According to ‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, the Caliph deliberated on the matter for approximately one month after consulting several individuals who supported the idea. However, ‘Umar ultimately decided not to proceed with systematic documentation. This situation continued until the period of political turmoil and *fitna* that followed the assassination of Caliph ‘Uthman and the subsequent civil war between ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya (Kamali, 2009, pp. 42–43).

A significant development later occurred during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (d. 101 H), who initiated more systematic efforts to document the *Sunna*. He first appointed Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Hazm (d. 117 H), governor of Medina, to collect and document the *Sunna* of the Prophet, particularly reports transmitted through ‘Amrah bint ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Ansariyya (d. 98 H). He also assigned al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (d. 107 H) to assist Ibn Hazm. Another important scholar involved in this effort was Muhammad ibn Muslim ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124 H), a Medinan scholar and teacher of Imam Malik (Kamali, 2009, p. 43).

Following the period of Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the second century witnessed further development in the documentation of *Hadīth*. One of the most prominent scholars was Imam Malik (d. 179 H), author of the well-known *al-Muwatta’*. His method of compilation was systematic and organized according to thematic headings. The *Muwatta’* was reportedly written in response to a request from the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur, who sought an authoritative work on the *aḥkām* of the *Sharī‘a* based on authentic *Sunna* (Kamali, 2009, pp. 44–45).

The preservation of *Hadīth* therefore involved both material and interpretive dimensions. According to al-Shatibi, preservation can be understood in two forms. The first is the material aspect, which concerns preserving sounds and expressions from being forgotten, omitted, or corrupted. The second concerns preserving meaning from distortion, deviation, and ambiguity (Qaradawi, 2013, p. 432). These two dimensions demonstrate that the historical documentation of *Hadīth* was not only concerned with recording transmitted reports but also with protecting their meaning and reliability across generations.

2. The Methodology of Classical Hadīth Criticism

The term *naqd al-Hadīth*, or classical Hadīth criticism, refers to a rigorous methodology used to determine and verify the authenticity of *Hadīth*. Scholars carefully scrutinized different aspects of a report in order to assess its reliability, beginning with the chain of narrators (*sanad* or *isnād*) and continuing with its textual content (*matan*). These two dimensions were central because they enabled scholars to examine the continuity of transmission, the qualifications of individual transmitters, their uprightness and accuracy, and the possibility of hidden defects that might indicate weakness or fabrication (Brown, 2007, pp. 69–89).

According to Alam and Scheider (2021), *aḥādīth* are structurally distinctive because each report consists of two principal components: the chain of narrators (*sanad*) and the content of the report (*matan*). The *sanad* identifies the transmitters who conveyed the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), beginning with the final transmitter who recorded the report in a collection and tracing the chain back through earlier transmitters to the Companion who narrated it from the Prophet. The chain placed at the beginning of a *Hadīth* therefore provides an important basis for assessing its strength and authenticity. The *matan*, meanwhile, refers to the content of the report, including sayings, actions, physical descriptions, and tacit approvals attributed to the Prophet.

Classical Hadīth criticism subjected both components to systematic evaluation. The criticism of the chain of transmission relied on several interrelated disciplines. One of the most important was *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dīl*, which evaluated the character, piety (*ʿadl*), and accuracy (*ḍabt*) of individual transmitters. Scholars also drew on biographical disciplines such as *ʿilm al-rijāl* to establish the identities and historical backgrounds of narrators. Another important criterion was continuity (*ittiṣāl*), which required critics to determine whether the chain was uninterrupted and whether transmitters could plausibly have met and received reports directly from one another. Corroboration, or *i'tibār*, was also used to assess credibility by comparing one narration with reports transmitted by others from the same or related sources (Brown, 2007, pp. 69–89).

Forgery could occur either in the *isnād* or in the *matan*. Forgery in the *isnād* was often associated with practices such as attaching a newly constructed chain to an existing report or appropriating another transmitter's chain. This practice was known as *sariqat al-Hadīth* and was also associated with *tarkīb al-asānīd*, or the artificial construction of chains. Forgery in the *matan*, by contrast, involved altering, inventing, or falsely attributing statements to the Prophet. Brown (2007, p. 74) distinguishes between intentional and unintentional forms of such distortion, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Forms of Forgery in the Isnād and Matan

Intention	Concerning the Isnād	Remarks	Concerning the Matan	Remarks
Intentional	Forging a new corroborating <i>isnād</i> for an existing tradition; stealing another <i>isnād</i> (<i>sariqat al-Hadīth</i>)	Such reports may be classified as <i>munkar</i> or unacceptable	Plain fabrication; deliberately attributing another person's statement to the Prophet	Such reports are classified as <i>mawḍūʿ</i> (forged) or <i>kadhib</i> (falsehood)
Unintentional	Confusing chains of transmission; mixing one <i>isnād</i> with another	May result in a <i>munkar</i> report	Attributing a scholar's statement to the Prophet; transforming a Companion's statement into a Prophetic report; confusing a transmitter's comment with the text of the <i>Hadīth</i>	Such errors occur unintentionally; the first two may be termed <i>rafʿ</i> or <i>ziyāda</i> , while insertion into the text is termed <i>mudraj</i>

Source: Adapted from Brown (2007, p. 74).

The classical Sunni methodology of Hadīth criticism gradually developed into a three-tiered process. The first tier required the presentation of an *isnād* as the source of a report. The second tier involved evaluating the reliability of the transmitters within that chain. The third tier consisted of seeking corroborating evidence for the report (Brown, 2007, p. 77). These three components became fundamental to the classical system of

authentication.

a) The *Isnād*

The *isnād* occupied a crucial position in the development of classical Hadīth criticism. Al-Shāfi‘ī famously emphasized the importance of identifying the source of transmitted knowledge, while Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) stated that the *isnād* formed part of religion and prevented individuals from attributing statements without accountability (Brown, 2007, p. 77). Across successive generations, Muslim scholars increasingly systematized the evaluation of transmitters and transmission chains, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Generations of Classical Hadīth Critics

Period	Generation	Major Critics
100–200 AH / 720–820 CE	1	Early critics: al-Zuhrī, al-A‘mash
	2	Primary: Shu‘ba, al-Thawrī, al-Awzā‘ī, Malik, Ibn ‘Uyayna. Lesser: Ibn Jurayj, Hammād b. Salama, al-Layth b. Sa‘d, Hammād b. Zayd, Hushaym b. Bashīr
	3	Primary: Ibn al-Mubārak, Wakī‘ b. al-Jarrāh, Yaḥyā al-Qaṭṭān, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī. Lesser: al-Shāfi‘ī, Abu Mushir ‘Abd al-A‘lā b. Mushir
200–300 AH / 820–910 CE	4	Primary: Ibn Ma‘īn, ‘Alī b. al-Maḍīnī, Ibn Ḥanbal. Lesser: Ibn Numayr, Abu Khaythama, Ibn Abī Shayba, Ibn Rāhawayh, Abu Ḥafṣ al-Fallās
	5	Primary: al-Bukhārī, Abu Zur‘a al-Rāzī, Abu Ḥātim al-Rāzī. Lesser: al-Juzajānī, Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, al-Nasā‘ī
300–400 AH / 910–1010 CE	6	Primary: Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Ibn ‘Adī. Lesser: al-‘Uqaylī, Ibn Ḥibbān
	7	Primary: Abu al-Faṭḥ al-Azdī, al-Dāraqutnī, al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī

Source: Adapted from Brown (2007, pp. 77–79).

According to reports attributed to Anas b. Mālīk, scholars did not initially demand detailed information about the *isnād*. However, after the political conflicts of approximately 680–692 CE, greater attention was given to identifying the sources of transmitted reports. The purpose was to distinguish reports associated with the people of the *Sunna* (*ahl al-Sunna*) from those considered unreliable or politically motivated (Brown, 2007, p. 79).

b) Rating Transmitters

The second tier of Hadīth criticism involved identifying the individuals who constituted the *isnād*, evaluating their reliability, and assessing the risks posed by unreliable transmitters. The first criterion concerned personal integrity. A narrator was expected to possess an acceptable level of piety (*‘adl*), sound belief, and good character. The second criterion concerned accuracy in transmission (*ḍabt*), including the ability to remember, preserve, and transmit reports correctly.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, terminology for rating transmitters became increasingly standardized. By the tenth century, Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) organized transmitters into eight levels according to their reliability and usefulness in Hadīth scholarship, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Levels of Hadīth Transmitter Reliability

Level	Label / Classification	Status of Narration
1	Reliable (<i>thiqa, mutqin, thabt</i>)	May be used as proof in legal and Hadīth scholarship
2	Sincere (<i>ṣadūq, lā ba’s bihi</i>)	May be recorded and used as proof when supported by corroboration
3	Venerable (<i>shaykh</i>)	May be used to identify corroborating evidence depending on the strength of the report
4	Righteous (<i>ṣāliḥ</i>)	Recorded and considered with caution
5	Lenient in Hadīth (<i>layyin al-Hadīth</i>)	Weak and generally requires additional corroboration
6	Not strong (<i>laysa bi-qawī</i>)	Considered weak
7	Weak (<i>ḍa‘īf</i>)	Generally not relied upon independently
8	Liar or abandoned (<i>matrūk al-Hadīth, dhāhib al-Hadīth, kadhḥāb</i>)	Not used as evidence

Source: Adapted from Brown (2007, pp. 83–85).

A substantial scholarly literature developed around transmitter criticism. Among the important works were *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* by Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), *Aḥwāl al-Rijāl* by al-Juzajānī (d. 259/873), *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr* by al-Bukhārī, and *al-Jarḥ wa al-Taʿdīl* by Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (Brown, 2007, pp. 83–85). Other important works included *Tārīkh al-Thiqāt* by al-ʿIjlī (d. 261/875), *Kitāb al-Thiqāt* and *Kitāb al-Majrūhīn* by Ibn Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-Ḍuʿafāʾ al-Kabīr* by al-Bukhārī, and *al-Kāmil fī Ḍuʿafāʾ al-Rijāl* by Ibn ʿAdī (Brown, 2007, p. 85).

The second major criterion in transmitter evaluation was continuity of transmission (*al-ittiṣāl*). Critics examined whether a narrator could have directly received the report from the person from whom it was attributed. If the source could not be identified, if the two individuals could not plausibly have met, or if there was no evidence of direct transmission, the chain could be classified as broken (*munqaṭiʿ*).

A sound transmission chain, by contrast, was expected to be continuous (*muttaṣil*). Critics therefore paid close attention to explicit transmission formulas. Expressions such as “he narrated to me” (*ḥaddathanī*), “he reported to us” (*akhbaranā*), and “I heard from” (*samīʿtu min*) indicated relatively direct forms of transmission. The preposition *an* (“from” or “according to”), however, did not necessarily prove direct transmission and therefore required further scrutiny. Scholars might compare the death date of a teacher with the age of a student in order to determine whether they were contemporaries and could plausibly have met (Brown, 2007, pp. 89–90).

By the middle of the eighth century, Ḥadīth scholars increasingly distinguished several recognized modes of transmission. These included:

- 1) Reading a teacher’s Ḥadīth back to him, expressed through *akhbaranā*;
- 2) Listening to the teacher read the Ḥadīth, expressed through *ḥaddathanā*;
- 3) Receiving a teacher’s written material for transmission (*munāwala*);
- 4) Receiving explicit permission from the teacher to transmit (*ijāza*);
- 5) Discovering a written text without direct transmission from the teacher (*wijāda*) (Brown, 2007, pp. 89–90).

c) Finding Corroboration

The third tier of classical Ḥadīth criticism involved corroboration. Corroboration was important for assessing whether a particular transmitter’s narration was supported by independent or parallel transmission. If a narrator alone transmitted a report that none of the other students of the same teacher reported, the reliability of that narration might require further scrutiny.

Ḥadīth transmission was closely connected to the Companions of the Prophet, who transmitted reports to the following generation (*tābiʿīn*). Within corroborative analysis, a supporting report transmitted through another Companion was referred to as a *shāhid* (“witness”). If another transmitter narrated a similar report from the same source, the relationship was described as *mutābaʿa* (“parallelism”). These two forms of corroboration served different functions: parallel transmission strengthened confidence in a particular chain, while a witness report strengthened confidence in the broader tradition.

A *shāhid* did not need to reproduce the supporting report word for word. A report could corroborate another Ḥadīth even when expressed differently, provided that it conveyed substantially the same meaning. Such corroboration helped demonstrate that a particular idea or teaching attributed to the Prophet circulated through more than one transmission pathway. Parallelism, meanwhile, strengthened confidence in the reliability of a particular narration by showing that another transmitter preserved a comparable report from the same or a closely related source (Brown, 2007, pp. 92–93).

3. The Methodology of Common Link

The common-link theory, initially developed by Joseph Schacht and later elaborated by scholars such as G. H. A. Juynboll, Harald Motzki, and others, examines the transmission pathways of *Ḥadīth* in order to identify the most recent common transmitter within a particular transmission network. This methodology focuses primarily on the analysis of the *isnād*, or chain of transmission, to reconstruct the possible origins and routes through which a report circulated. In this respect, common-link analysis emphasizes the complexity of *Ḥadīth* transmission and the importance of systematic scrutiny in tracing the historical development of Islamic traditions (Schoeler, 2006, pp. 124–129).

Several key elements characterize the common-link methodology. First, *isnād* analysis constitutes its primary analytical basis. Scholars examine the names, sequence, and interconnections among transmitters within different chains in order to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. Second, the method seeks to identify the common link (CL), namely the most recent transmitter from whom several transmission lines appear to branch. The identification of this transmitter helps scholars reconstruct the dissemination history of a particular report. Third, common-link analysis considers the social and historical contexts of transmission, particularly because many reports circulated orally before being systematically recorded. Fourth, the method seeks to determine whether a particular *Ḥadīth* can plausibly be traced to an earlier authority or whether its form may reflect later transmission contexts. Fifth, common-link analysis frequently reveals textual and *isnād* variants that illuminate how traditions were transmitted and reformulated across different regions or scholarly circles (Schoeler, 2006, pp.

124–129).

Two concepts are particularly important within this analytical framework: the common link (CL) and the partial common link (PCL). The common link refers to the most recent common transmitter from whom several transmission lines diverge, while a partial common link refers to a later branching point within the transmission network. These distinctions help explain how a tradition may have spread through successive generations of transmitters.

Table 4. Common Link and Partial Common Link in *Isnād* Analysis

No.	Type of Link	Description	Illustrative Transmitter
1	Common Link (CL)	The most recent common transmitter after whom the <i>isnād</i> branches into several lines of transmission	Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah
2	Partial Common Link (PCL)	A later branching point within the <i>isnād</i> that indicates further dissemination or reformulation of a tradition	‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Zayd

Source: Adapted from Schoeler (2006, pp. 130–140).

The precise identity of a common link or partial common link varies according to the *Hadīth* under examination. The examples in Table 4 therefore illustrate the analytical categories rather than establishing fixed transmitter roles across all traditions.

Different scholars have developed distinct approaches to the study of *Hadīth* transmission. Schacht emphasized the common link as the most recent common transmitter from whom several transmission lines diverge. Juynboll expanded this approach by introducing and refining the concept of partial common links, which identify later points of dissemination within the *isnād*. Sezgin, by contrast, focused more extensively on identifying the direct written sources behind complete compilations rather than reconstructing the transmission history of individual traditions through common-link analysis (Schoeler, 2006, pp. 130–140).

Table 5. Major Approaches to *Hadīth* Transmission Analysis

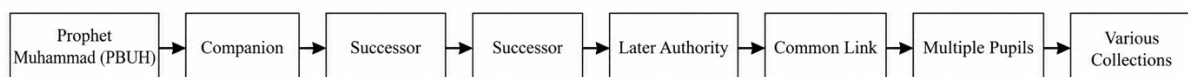
No.	Scholar	Concept / Approach	Description
1	Joseph Schacht	Common Link (CL)	Identifies the most recent common transmitter from whom various lines of transmission diverge
2	G. H. A. Juynboll	Partial Common Link (PCL)	Identifies later branching points within the <i>isnād</i> that indicate further dissemination and possible reformulation of a tradition
3	Fuat Sezgin	Direct Sources of Compilations	Examines entire compilatory works in order to identify their direct, often written, sources rather than focusing exclusively on individual common links

Source: Adapted from Schoeler (2006, pp. 130–140).

Ignaz Goldziher approached the historical reliability of *Hadīth* with considerable skepticism. His first argument concerned the tendency of later generations to idealize the past by constructing narratives that connected revered political and religious figures with the development of Islamic tradition. In this context, Goldziher questioned reports attributing a decisive role in the codification of *Hadīth* to ‘Umar II. Second, he emphasized the limited independent historical evidence supporting claims about systematic collection during that period. Third, he drew attention to the political interests of the Umayyads, arguing that ruling elites may have had incentives to promote narratives that strengthened their religious legitimacy. Finally, he questioned the authenticity of some reports on the grounds that they may have been reshaped or fabricated in later periods. Overall, Goldziher’s skepticism rested on historical contextualization, concerns about the motives underlying transmission, and the possibility that later scholars projected contemporary religious concerns onto earlier figures (Schoeler, 2006, pp. 121–124).

Setting Goldziher’s skepticism aside, research on the early development of Muslim *Hadīth* transmission indicates that formalized *isnād* practices may be traced to the late first Islamic century. Juynboll’s analysis of early transmission networks identifies a recurring pattern in which a single strand of three, four, or five transmitters connects the Prophet to a later key transmitter, after which the chain branches into several lines. This pattern can be represented schematically as follows:

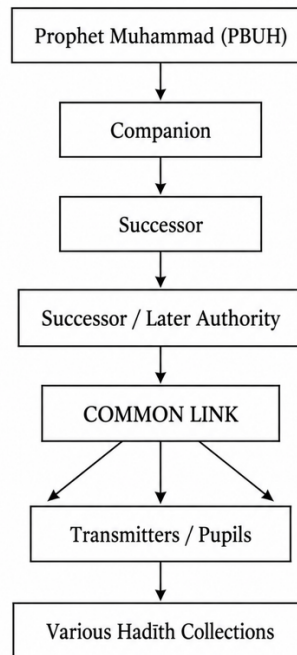
Figure 1. General Pattern of Common-Link Transmission in *Hadīth*



Source: Adapted from Juynboll (1991, pp. 279–280).

In this model, the common link occupies a central position because it marks the point at which a previously narrow transmission line begins to branch into multiple later pathways (Juynboll, 1991, p. 279).

Figure 2. General Pattern of Common-Link Transmission



Source: Adapted from Juynboll (1991, pp. 279–280).

The common link may therefore carry particular analytical significance in relation to both the *matan* and the transmission strand. First, the common link may represent an important stage in the dissemination of the textual content of a *Hadīth*. Second, the common link provides a crucial connection between earlier authorities and the later transmitters through whom the report becomes widely attested. Juynboll consequently treats the common link as a key point for reconstructing the historical spread of a tradition (Juynboll, 1991, p. 280).

Juynboll's study of the *mu'ammārūn*, or exceptionally long-lived transmitters, further examines how geographical origin and biographical chronology may affect the reconstruction of early *isnād* networks. His analysis considers transmission centers such as Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Kufa, and Basra and observes that some single-strand transmissions leading toward a common link depend on narrators credited with unusually long lifespans. Particular attention is given to transmitters associated with Kufa and Basra whose reported ages sometimes extended beyond one hundred years. These biographical claims become important because the plausibility of a transmission chain depends partly on whether the individuals involved could historically have met one another (Juynboll, 1991, p. 281).

One example concerns 'Adī ibn Hātim, who appears within early Kufan transmission networks and is associated with a substantial number of traditions. Juynboll's analysis draws upon the later *rijāl* and *isnād* compilations of Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf al-Mizzī (d. 742 H/1341 CE), an influential Syrian Hadīth scholar. Among al-Mizzī's major works are *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl fī Asmā' al-Rijāl* and *Tuhfat al-Ashraf bi-Ma'rifat al-Atrāf*. The latter provides extensive listings of transmission chains associated with canonical collections and organizes a large body of material according to Companions and subsequent transmitters. This arrangement allows researchers to trace numerous transmission strands and compare the recurrence of particular narrators across different collections (Juynboll, 1991, pp. 281–282).

Within this material, Juynboll examines traditions transmitted on the authority of 'Adī ibn Hātim and observes that a considerable proportion of the chains converge on 'Āmir ibn Sharāḥīl al-Sha'bī (d. 104 H/722 CE). The analysis raises the question of whether al-Sha'bī directly heard Prophetic reports from 'Adī ibn Hātim or whether later transmission structures attributed such material to him. Among the *isnād* strands examined through al-Mizzī's compilations, particular traditions concern the Qur'anic expression of the "black and white thread" and questions relating to hunting dogs and the permissibility of consuming their prey.

Juynboll's later research develops this point further by considering whether certain common links may have introduced or shaped their own authorities within the transmission process. In the case of al-Sha'bī's corpus, two possible scenarios are considered. The first is that al-Sha'bī genuinely transmitted material from 'Adī because the

earlier source tradition was sufficiently rich and varied. The second is that al-Sha‘bī may have played a more active role in establishing ‘Adī’s position within the transmission history of particular reports. Under this interpretation, al-Sha‘bī becomes especially significant because other chains associated with ‘Adī either remain isolated single strands or develop through separate common links. This example illustrates how common-link analysis attempts to reconstruct not only the formal structure of an *isnād* but also the historical processes through which particular transmitters became central nodes in the circulation of *Hadīth*.

Discussion

The study of *Hadīth* in Islamic scholarship has developed through several critical methodologies designed to assess the authenticity, reliability, and transmission of Prophetic reports. Among these approaches, classical *Hadīth* criticism and common-link methodology constitute two important analytical frameworks. Although both are concerned with the transmission and credibility of *Hadīth*, they differ in their primary objects of analysis, criteria of evaluation, and methodological orientation.

Classical *Hadīth* criticism refers to the systematic process developed by Muslim scholars to distinguish authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) reports from weak (*ḍa‘īf*) and fabricated (*mawḍū‘*) reports. Its methodology focuses on both the chain of transmission (*isnād*) and the textual content (*matan*). Through these two dimensions, scholars evaluate whether a report can be reliably attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

One of the principal components of classical criticism is *isnād* analysis. The chain of narrators is examined in order to identify the individuals responsible for transmitting a report and to assess their qualifications, reliability, and integrity. A transmission chain consisting of well-known and trustworthy narrators is generally considered stronger than one containing unknown, unreliable, or disconnected transmitters.

A second component is biographical evaluation, commonly associated with *‘ilm al-rijāl*. This discipline examines the lives and backgrounds of narrators, including their character, reputation, scholarly relationships, accuracy, and capacity for reliable transmission. The extensive biographical literature developed by *Hadīth* scholars reflects the importance placed on evaluating the credibility of individual transmitters.

Classical criticism also includes evaluation of the *matan*. In addition to examining the chain, scholars assess the content of a report in relation to established Islamic principles, the Qur’an, other reliable Prophetic traditions, and the known practices of the Prophet. Apparent contradictions, inconsistencies, or implausibilities may therefore become grounds for further scrutiny of a particular report.

Another important component is corroboration. Scholars compare a report with other narrations found in the same or different *Hadīth* collections. Agreement among multiple transmission routes can strengthen confidence in the reliability of a report, particularly when those routes involve independent or mutually supporting narrators.

Historical context also plays an important role in assessing transmitted material. Political developments, theological disputes, regional scholarly traditions, and community practices may influence how particular reports were transmitted and understood. Attention to such contexts allows scholars to evaluate not only the formal transmission chain but also the historical circumstances surrounding the circulation of a *Hadīth*.

Common-link methodology approaches the transmission of *Hadīth* from a different perspective. Rather than concentrating primarily on the reliability of each individual transmitter, it focuses on patterns within multiple *isnāds* associated with the same or similar traditions. Its central concern is identifying the transmitter from whom several chains begin to branch into multiple transmission pathways.

The common-link approach therefore pays close attention to multiple chains of transmission and related forms of corroboration, including *mutāba‘āt*. When a report appears through several transmission routes, scholars can compare the chains to determine where they converge, where they diverge, and which transmitters occupy central positions within the network. The existence of several independent or partially independent transmission routes may strengthen confidence in the circulation of a tradition, although the mere existence of multiple chains does not by itself establish authenticity.

A further analytical concern is the strengthening of reports through corroboration. When different chains preserve similar material, the overlap among them may provide additional support for a narration. In classical terminology, such corroboration can affect the assessment of a report, particularly when a weaker narration is supported by additional evidence.

The diversity of transmission is also significant. A tradition transmitted through narrators located in different scholarly centers or geographical regions may provide evidence of wider circulation. Such diversity can help scholars reconstruct the historical dissemination of a report and examine whether the tradition remained confined to a particular transmitter or expanded through broader scholarly networks.

However, not all common links carry the same analytical weight. The reliability of the transmitter identified as a common link must still be examined. The presence of a central transmitter does not automatically establish the authenticity of a *Hadīth*. Rather, the narrator’s credibility, chronology, relationship with teachers and students, and position within the transmission network must be evaluated together with the wider structure of the *isnād*.

Classical Hadīth criticism and common-link methodology differ principally in their analytical focus. Classical criticism concentrates on the evaluation of individual transmitters, the continuity of transmission, and the reliability of the *matan*. Common-link methodology, by contrast, gives greater attention to the structure of transmission networks and to the points at which multiple chains converge and subsequently branch.

Their assessment criteria also differ. Classical Hadīth criticism relies heavily on biographical evaluation, narrator integrity, accuracy, continuity of transmission, and textual consistency. Common-link analysis places greater emphasis on the configuration of transmission routes, the location of central transmitters, and patterns of dissemination across different chains.

Despite these differences, the two approaches can be complementary. Classical criticism provides detailed criteria for assessing the reliability of individual narrators and reports, while common-link analysis contributes a broader perspective on how a tradition circulated through networks of transmitters. When used together, these approaches can provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the reliability and historical transmission of *Hadīth*.

Table 6. Comparison between Classical Hadīth Criticism and Common-Link Methodology

Aspect	Classical Hadīth Criticism	Common-Link Methodology
Primary focus	Reliability of individual narrators, continuity of <i>isnād</i> , and evaluation of <i>matan</i>	Structure and branching patterns of multiple transmission chains
Main object of analysis	Individual <i>Hadīth</i> , narrators, <i>isnād</i> , and <i>matan</i>	Networks of related <i>isnāds</i>
Major criteria	‘ <i>Adl</i> , ‘ <i>dabt</i> , continuity, corroboration, textual consistency	Convergence, divergence, common transmitters, and dissemination patterns
Role of narrator evaluation	Central to determining authenticity	Important for assessing the significance of common and partial common links
Role of corroboration	Strengthens individual reports through supporting chains	Helps identify transmission patterns and branching points
Analytical orientation	Authentication and classification	Reconstruction of transmission history
Potential contribution	Determines the strength and reliability of reports	Explains how traditions circulated and developed through transmission networks

The comparative analysis therefore shows that both methodologies make important contributions to the study of Hadīth. Classical criticism offers a detailed framework for evaluating narrators and textual content, whereas common-link analysis provides a broader perspective on the historical transmission and dissemination of traditions. Together, they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how Prophetic reports were preserved, evaluated, classified, and transmitted within Islamic scholarship.

Conclusion

Classical Hadīth criticism employs a systematic methodology to evaluate the authenticity and reliability of Prophetic reports. Its principal components include the examination of the *isnād*, biographical evaluation through ‘*ilm al-rijāl*, assessment of the *matan*, and corroboration through supporting transmission routes. Each component serves a distinct function in determining whether a narrator and a report can be considered reliable. Through these procedures, classical scholars developed a rigorous framework for distinguishing authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) Hadīth from good (*ḥasan*), weak (*da‘īf*), and fabricated (*mawḍū‘*) reports.

Common-link methodology contributes to the study of Hadīth by examining the structure of transmission networks and identifying transmitters from whom multiple chains of transmission branch. It enables scholars to trace the dissemination of a tradition, compare transmission variants, identify central transmitters, and assess relationships among different *isnāds*. Related corroborative mechanisms, including *mutāba‘āt*, can further strengthen the assessment of transmitted reports when independent or parallel chains support one another. Common-link analysis therefore complements classical criticism by providing an additional perspective on the historical development and circulation of Hadīth.

The evolution of Hadīth documentation was shaped by several historical challenges and developments. One important factor was the early restriction on writing Prophetic traditions, which was intended to prevent confusion between the Qur’ān and the *Sunna*. This limitation affected the earliest stages of Hadīth documentation. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), different attitudes emerged among the Companions. Some, including ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, were cautious about systematic documentation, whereas others, including ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, considered written preservation necessary for protecting Prophetic teachings.

The limitations of human memory also contributed to the increasing importance of documentation. As generations passed and transmission chains became longer, dependence on oral transmission created greater possibilities for error, omission, and distortion. Muslim scholars consequently recognized the need to record traditions more systematically in order to preserve the words and practices attributed to the Prophet.

Another major development was the emergence of specialized Hadīth scholarship during the first and second Islamic centuries. Scholars increasingly formalized procedures for collecting, transmitting, evaluating, and documenting Prophetic reports. The development of the *isnād* became particularly important because it provided a means of tracing reports back through identifiable transmitters and establishing criteria for evaluating their reliability.

Political turmoil also accelerated the need for critical documentation. The conflicts that followed the assassination of Caliph ‘Uthman and subsequent civil wars created conditions in which competing political and theological claims could influence the circulation of religious reports. Under these circumstances, scholars increasingly emphasized the importance of identifying sources and scrutinizing transmission chains.

The initiative of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz constituted another significant development in the institutionalization of Hadīth documentation. His efforts to encourage scholars and officials to collect and preserve Prophetic traditions represented an important stage in the transition from predominantly dispersed transmission toward more organized forms of compilation.

Finally, the emergence of major Hadīth collections marked a decisive stage in the preservation of Prophetic tradition. Works such as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* applied increasingly rigorous criteria of transmission and became authoritative sources within Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and religious scholarship. The development of these collections demonstrates how centuries of transmission, documentation, narrator criticism, corroboration, and textual evaluation eventually produced highly structured traditions of Hadīth scholarship.

Taken together, these developments show that the preservation of Hadīth was neither a single event nor a simple process of textual recording. It developed gradually through oral transmission, written documentation, narrator evaluation, *isnād* analysis, textual criticism, corroboration, and systematic compilation. Classical Hadīth criticism and common-link methodology illuminate different aspects of this process. The former emphasizes authentication and reliability, while the latter highlights transmission structures and historical dissemination. Their combined study therefore contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the preservation and transmission of the *Sunna* as a central source of Islamic thought and practice.

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