

The Science of Hidden Hadith Defects: An Analytical Study of its Pillars, Methodology and Importance

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Abstract

The science of hidden defects in Hadith (‘Ilal al-Hadith) is among the most precise and delicate sciences of the Prophetic tradition. It investigates subtle causes that undermine the authenticity of a narration despite its outward soundness. This study aims to clarify the importance of the science of ‘ilal, explain the four pillars upon which it is based, present the scientific methodology for studying defective reports, and explain the categories of defects and the ways scholars detect them. The study also provides practical examples from books on defects and introduces the most significant works and scholars in this field. The findings show that knowledge of defects is attainable only by master memorizers who collect the various chains and compare them, and that mastering this science is essential to preserve the Sunnah and purify its traditions. Since the **absence of a defect is the fifth and final condition of a sahih (authentic) hadith**, the study stresses that judging a narration as authentic is not achieved merely through connected chains, upright and precise narrators and freedom from contradiction (shudhudh); rather, the researcher must also ascertain that it is free from any hidden flaw. This last condition is the most difficult, because the defect is not apparent and is known only to expert critics.

Keywords: Ilm al-‘Ilal, Hadith Criticism, Sahih Hadith Conditions, Hidden Defects in Narrations, Usul al-Hadith

Introduction

Hadith scholars define a defect (‘illa) as:

«سبب غامض خفي قاذح مع أن الظاهر السلامة منه»⁽¹⁾

“a subtle, hidden cause that harms the authenticity of a report although its outward appearance seems sound”. A hadith discovered to contain such a defect may be called “ma‘lūl” (defective), and this science is distinct from general hadith terminology and the sciences of narrator evaluation (jarh wa-ta‘dil). The author al-Hakim al-Naysaburi considered the knowledge of defects an independent discipline, saying:

«هذا النوع منه معرفة علل الحديث، وهو علم برأسه غير الصحيح، والسقيم، والجرح والتعديل»⁽²⁾

“This type includes the knowledge of hidden defects and is a science in its own right, distinct from the sciences of sound and weak, and from jarh and ta‘dil”.

The science of ‘ilal evolved in the late period of the Companions. Ibn Rajab noted that Shu‘bah ibn al-Hajjaj was the first to expand discussion on continuous chains and to search out subtleties of defects, after which leading imams such as Yahya ibn Sa‘id al-Qattan, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Mahdi, Yahya ibn Ma‘in, ‘Ali ibn al-Madini, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Bukhari, and Muslim laid down its foundations.⁽³⁾

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Definition of the Defect and the Emergence of the Science

Definition of the Defect

Linguistically, ‘illa denotes a cause. In the hadith technical usage, it means “**a hidden, obscure cause that undermines the validity of a report**”⁽⁴⁾. Some scholars critique the usage of the words “ma‘lūl” or “mu‘allal,” preferring “ma‘all” because it is derived from the quadrilateral verb “a‘alla”.⁽⁵⁾

The Emergence and Development of ‘Ilal

The roots of this science go back to the era of the Companions. Muhammad ibn Sirin and several Tabi‘un carefully examined the soundness of chains and paused when they sensed a flaw. As narrators multiplied and weak or dissembling transmitters appeared, the need arose for a science that could expose hidden faults in isnads. Ibn al-Salah writes:

اعلم أن معرفة علل الحديث من أجل علوم الحديث وأدقها وأشرفها، وإنما يضطلع بذلك أهل الحفظ والخبرة والفهم الثاقب⁽⁶⁾

“Know that the knowledge of defects is among the most noble, precise and elevated types of hadith sciences; only those who possess extensive memorization, expertise and acute understanding can undertake it”. Scholars, therefore, paid attention to articulating the rules used in invalidation and authentication and transmitted them in their works.

The Four Pillars of Studying a Defect

The document under study notes that there are four pillars for studying a defect. Each will be explained separately:

1. Determining the Type of Defect (تعيين جنس العلة)

A defect in a narration is a mistake committed by a transmitter and has various forms. The first step for the researcher is to determine the kind of mistake. Among the types of defects are (وصل المرسل) **connecting a broken chain** (relating a hadith as continuous when in fact it is mursal), الإدراج في الإسناد, and (تأليف أو elevation a halted report to prophetic status, adding an extra narrator in the isnad, and (إسقاط راوٍ من الإسناد) **omitting a narrator**. Additional types include the “mudraj” (interpolated), “maqlūb” (reversed), and “muḍṭarib” (confused), which al-Hakim and al-Suyuti mention when detailing the categories of defects.

2. Determining the Cause of the Defect (تعيين سبب العلة)

After identifying the type of mistake, the researcher must ascertain its cause: Did the narrator forget? Did he misread a name? Did his eye wander from one hadith to another? Causes may also include the weakness of the narrator’s precision, his old age, or his narrating from a shaykh whose narrations he had not mastered.

3. Methods of Detecting a Defect (وسائل إدراك العلة)

It is not sufficient to assert that a narrator erred; rather, one must demonstrate **how the researcher recognized this error**. Methods include:

Collecting the various routes of the hadith: (جمع طرق الحديث) Ahmad ibn Hanbal said:

«الحديث إذا لم تجمع طرقه لم تفهمه والحديث يفسر بعضه بعضاً»⁽⁷⁾

“If you do not gather the paths of a hadith, you will not understand it”, and ‘Ali ibn al-Madini noted:

«الباب إذا لم يجمع طرقه لم يتبين خطؤه»⁽⁷⁾

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“A chapter whose paths are not compiled, its error will not be evident”.

Knowing the detailed circumstances of transmitters: For example, a narrator might report in a city other than his own without his books, or after his memory had deteriorated, or it may be that he was weak in his narrations from a particular shaykh.

Comparing the chains: (مقارنة المرويات) After collecting the paths, the narrations are compared; if they concur and there is no discrepancy, their soundness appears, but if they differ, a defect may emerge. The researcher then prefers between the narrations using various, non-standardized indicators.

4. Weighing Indicators and Explaining Defects (الترجيح بالقرائن وبيان العلل)

When transmitters differ in their narration from the same shaykh, it becomes necessary to weigh between them. Precise scientific indicators are used. Some serve to prefer one narration, such as **numerical superiority** (العدد والكثرة), **quantity**, and **superior memory** (الأحفظية), and others serve to invalidate, such as **a narrator's disagreement with the group or with someone more precise** (مخالفة الجماعة أو الأحفظ). The scholars prefer the narration transmitted by more numerous or more reliable transmitters and deem the isolated, anomalous report defective.

Methodological Stages for Studying a Defective Hadith

The study identifies the stages a researcher goes through to uncover hidden defects:

1. **Collecting the chains and narrations (takhrij):** The search begins by gathering the routes of the hadith from the repositories of the Sunnah – musnads, ma‘ājim, jami‘ works, and compilations. This collection is the foundation of all subsequent critical analysis; without encompassing the routes, one cannot perceive error.
2. **Comparing the chains to find the axis (madār):** After exhausting the routes, the researcher compares them to discover the **pivot** (مدار) upon which the narrations turn, whether primary or secondary. This identifies points of agreement and divergence.
3. **Comparing the narrations of the pupils of the pivot:** The researcher examines the narrations of the pupils of the shaykh who is the pivot of the hadith and weighs them to ascertain the degree and nature of their differences, whether in the isnad or the text.
4. **Applying the indicators to know the correct version:** If differences are established between the narrations, the researcher must weigh them using hadith indicators to distinguish the accurate narration from the others.

These stages are based on collection, inductive analysis, comparison, and critique, and resemble the steps laid out by Ibn al-Salah and al-Khattib al-Baghdadi on how to discover a defect.⁽⁸⁾

Categories and Types of Defects

A defect may be classified from several perspectives:

1. by its effect:

A disqualifying defect: the hadith is weakened because of it.

A non-disqualifying defect: the hadith is not weakened thereby, such as a narrator using the ambiguous formula “an” (عن) while being a mudallis, if another chain supports him.

2. by its location:

Defect in the chain: (سند) such as a mistake in a narrator's name or the omission of a narrator.

Defect in the text: (متن) such as an unpreserved wording in the text.

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3. **By both its effect and location:** A defect may occur in the chain and affect the text, happen in the text alone, or be non-disqualifying; Ibn Hajar identified six categories for these cases ⁽⁹⁾.

Al-Hakim divided the types of defective reports into ten categories ⁽¹⁰⁾, and al-Suyuti provided example ⁽¹¹⁾, including: when a chain appears sound but contains a narrator who did not hear from his teacher; when a narration is mural in one chain and musnad in another; or when a weak one replaces a trustworthy narrator, and so forth.

Methods of Recognizing a Defect Among Hadith Scholars

Hafiz Ibn Hajar notes that:

وإذا تقرر هذا فالسبيل إلى معرفة سلامة الحديث من العلة كما نقله المصنف عن الخطيب أن يجمع طرقه، فإن اتفقت رواته واستووا ظهرت سلامته، وإن اختلفوا أمكن ظهور العلة ⁽¹²⁾.

“The way to know a hadith’s freedom from a defect is to gather its chains; if the transmitters concur and are consistent, its soundness appears; if they differ, a defect may show”.

Ibn Rajab points out that:

"حذاق النقاد من الحفاظ لكثرة ممارستهم للحديث، ومعرفتهم بالرجال واحاديث كل واحد منهم، لهم فهم خاص (يفهمون) به أن هذا الحديث يشبه حديث فلان، ولا يشبه حديث فلان فيعللون الأحاديث بذلك" ⁽¹³⁾.

“critics sometimes rule a hadith defective based solely on their deep understanding and familiarity with the narrations of transmitters – they sense that a hadith resembles the narrations of one transmitter and not another”.

The practical steps employed by hadith scholars to identify a defect include:

- Collecting the routes of the hadith from all sources.
- Comparing them against one another, interpreting hadith by hadith; for hadith explains hadith.
- Recording the hadith through numerous paths; some preservers said: “If I do not have a hadith through a hundred routes, I am orphaned concerning it”.
- Weighing between the chains and distinguishing differences of connection, disconnection, stopping, and elevating.
- Examining the states of narrators, knowing their ranks, who tends to err, and from whom reliable reports are taken.

The Importance of the Science of ‘Ilal

Scholars agree that knowing hidden defects is the most exalted type of hadith science. Al-Khattib al-Baghdadi said:

"إن معرفة العلل أجل أنواع علم الحديث" ⁽¹⁴⁾.

“Knowing hadith defects is the noblest type of hadith science”.

Ibn Hajar noted that:

"هذا الفن أغمض أنواع الحديث وأدقها مسلكا، ولا يقوم به إلا من منحه الله تعالى فهما غايصا وإطلاعا حاويا وإدراكا لمراتب الرواة ومعرفة ثاقبة، ولهذا لم يتكلم فيه إلا أفراد أئمة هذا الشأن وحذاقهم³ وإليه المرجع في ذلك لما جعل الله فيهم من معرفة ذلك، والاطلاع على غوامضه دون غيرهم ممن لم يمارس ذلك" ⁽¹⁵⁾.

“This discipline is the most obscure type of hadith and the most delicate path; none can master it except those whom God grants deep understanding and knowledge of the ranks of narrators”.

Ibn Kathir explained that:

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"وهو فن خفي على كثير من علماء الحديث، حتى قال بعض حفاظهم: معرفتنا بهذا كهانة عند الجاهل" ⁽¹⁶⁾.

“This discipline is hidden from many hadith scholars; some preservers even said, “Our knowledge of this is like fortune-telling the ignorant”.

‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Mahdi explicitly stated that:

"لأن أعرف علة حديث هو عندي، أحب إلي من أن أكتب عشرين حديثاً ليس عندي" ⁽¹⁷⁾.

“He preferred knowing the defect of one hadith over memorizing twenty hadiths”.

Ibn Rajab said that critics sometimes endure hardships to see the defect of a single hadith.

The science of ‘ilal represents the fifth condition of an authentic hadith; a narration is not considered sound merely because its chain is connected, its transmitters are upright and precise, and its text is free of shudhudh – it must also be free of a disqualifying defect. Al-Hakim asserted that the sahih is not known by its chain alone but by:

«والحجة فيه عندنا الحفظ، والفهم، والمعرفة لا غير» ⁽¹⁸⁾.

“Understanding, memorization, and extensive listening”; scholars must discuss with people of insight to reveal what is hidden in a narration.

Ibn al-Salah also emphasized that detecting a defect requires memorization, knowledge, and sharp understanding ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Practical Applications of Studying Defects

First Hadith: Tayammum, even if one does not find water for a long time

The hadith is transmitted from al-Thawri, from Khalid al-Hadhdha’, from Abu Qilabah, from ‘Amr ibn Mihjal or Mihjin, from Abu Dharr as a marfu’ report: “The earth is sufficient for you, even if you do not find water for ten years...” Abu Zur‘ah rejected this chain and judged that the correct version is: Abu Qilabah from ‘Amr ibn Bujdan from Abu Dharr.

- **Type of defect:** Confusion in the father’s name of the narrator; “Mihjal” was mistaken, the correct name is “Bujdan”.

- **Cause of defect:** A mistake in naming the narrator’s father.

- **Means of detection:** Comparing the narrations of Qabisah ibn ‘Uqbah with those of ‘Abd al-Razzaq, Abu Ahmad, and others, and knowing that most called the narrator “‘Amr ibn Bujdan.”

- **Indicators of preference:** Numerical superiority and superior memory; indicators of invalidation: the narrator’s deviation from the majority and his hesitation.

Second Hadith: The Measure of the Prophet’s Ghushl

It is narrated from Qatadah from Anas that the Prophet (peace be upon him) would perform ghushl with a “Sa” and wudu with a “Mudd”. Abu Zur‘ah considered this report mistaken; the correct version is that it is from Safiyyah bint Shaybah, from ‘A’ishah, from the Prophet.

- **Type of defect:** Substituting one isnad for another.

- **Means of detection:** Collecting the paths and knowing the conditions and ranks of the narrators.

- **Cause of defect:** The narrator’s weak precision, despite his uprightness, and his following of the common isnad pattern.

- **Indicators of preference:** Superior memory, specialization, and numerical superiority; indicators of invalidation: the narrator’s disagreement with the most precise transmitters, disagreement with the group, and his following of the common isnad pattern.

Third Hadith: The Tooth stick is Purification for the Mouth

Imam al-Daraqutni was asked about a hadith narrated by Ibn Abi Atiq from his father from Abu Bakr

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that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The tooth stick is purification for the mouth”. He replied: It is narrated by Hammad ibn Salamah from Ibn Abi Atiq from his father from Abu Bakr, but a group of the people of the Hijaz disagreed; they transmitted it from Ibn Abi Atiq from his father from Aishah, and this is the correct version.

- **Type of defect:** Substituting one Companion for another.

- **Means of detection:** Collecting the routes, knowing the detailed circumstances of the narrators, and knowing their lands and travels.

- **Cause of defect:** The narrator’s weak precision, despite his uprightness, and his following of the common pattern.

- **Indicators of preference:** The large number of transmitters and the agreement of different regions; indicators of invalidation: disagreement with the group, disagreement among areas, and following the common pattern.

These examples illustrate how the researcher applies the four pillars and methodological stages to uncover a defect, and show that numerical superiority, superior memory, and careful consideration of indicators are among the most important tools of preference.

Works on the Science of Defects and Leading Scholars

Among the most important works that address the science of defects are:

1. **Al-‘Ilal al-Kabir by Imam al-Tirmidhi:** He composed it before his al-Jami‘ in a question-and-answer style; he would present narrations to his teachers, foremost among them al-Bukhari, and record their answers, thereby documenting their method of criticizing hadiths. He did not arrange the book by juristic chapters; rather, he gathered the questions as they occurred, which led some later scholars to rearrange it. He also recorded his teachers’ preferences and their comments on narrators and sometimes included a narration to remove any suspicion of a defect.
2. **Kitab al-‘Ilal by Ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi:** He arranged it by topics (purification, prayer, and so on) but did not follow a precise order within each chapter; he sometimes grouped questions related to a single narrator or combined the questions he asked his father and Abu Zur‘ah together. The book is structured as questions and answers; Ibn Abi Hatim cites a truncated isnad of the hadith and asks about the variant, then his father or Abu Zur‘ah responds by clarifying the correct version and its reasoning. They often mention only the part of the isnad upon which the discrepancy turns and omit the rest; rarely do they provide the full isnad, making the book a source for takhrij. They frequently mention multiple variants and then indicate which is preferred.
3. **Al-‘Ilal al-Waridah fi al-Ahadith al-Nabawiyyah by Imam al-Daraqutni:** He dictated it from memory to his student al-Barqani. He cited the hadith, then mentioned its routes and what differences existed in terms of elevating, halting, connecting, or sending. He listed the names of the transmitters and their conditions, commented on the mistakes of narrators and pointed out the correct version, noted who was unique in his transmission, and identified places of misreading and error. The book is classified as a grand compendium in criticism because it not only states the differences but also judges them.
4. **Al-Tamyeez by Imam Muslim:** In this work, he discussed the reasons that render a hadith defective, dealt with the differences of narrators between elevation, halting, and severing, and exposed famous hadiths that are defective, making it a foundational work in this field.

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Among the scholars who excelled in this science are Ali ibn al-Madini, whom Ibn Abi Hatim described as the most knowledgeable of people about hadith and its defects; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Bukhari, Muslim, and Abu Dawud, all of whom practiced applied criticism and formulated the principles followed by later scholars.

Conclusion

The science of hidden defects is a formidable fortress protecting the Prophetic Sunnah from alien elements, as it uncovers concealed flaws that many people do not detect. Studying a defect rests on four pillars: identifying the type of error, determining its cause, clarifying the means of detecting it and applying indicators to prefer between narrations. Researchers employ a scientific method that involves collecting and comparing chains and narrations, examining pupil narrations, and using indicators. The practical examples demonstrate that knowledge of defects is restricted to the masters who gather the chains of hadith and have a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances and ranks of narrators. Continued attention to the science of defects is essential for the integrity of narration and jurisprudence. Contemporary researchers should continue to examine the books of defects, refine their principles, and train to apply them. Although this science is precise and difficult, it is at the same time the most exalted of hadith sciences, as al-Khattib al-Baghdadi and Ibn al-Salah said; it is a necessary condition for arriving at the correct judgment on narrations and for keeping the Sunnah a trustworthy source of legislation.

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- 9 - Ibn us-Salah, "Marifat anwa'i'l-Ulum al-Hadeeth" (p. 188).
9 - قال الحافظ ابن الصلاح في "معرفة أنواع علم الحديث" ت الفحل والهميم (ص188): "ثم قد تقع العلة في إسناد الحديث - وهو الأكثر -، وقد تقع في متنه، ثم ما يقع في الإسناد قد يقدح في صحة الإسناد والمتن جميعا، كما في التعليل بالإرسال والوقف، وقد يقدح في صحة الإسناد خاصة من غير قدح في صحة المتن."

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10 - Al-Hakim, Ma'rifat uloom ul Hadith (p. 118).

¹⁰ - "قال أبو عبد الله: فقد ذكرنا علل الحديث على عشرة أجناس، وبقيت أجناس لم نذكرها، وإنما جعلتها مثالا لأحاديث كثيرة معلولة لم تهدي إليها المتبحر في هذا العلم، فإن معرفة علل الحديث من أجل هذه العلوم". "معرفة علوم الحديث" للحاكم (ص 118).

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¹⁶ - "الباعث الحثيث إلى اختصار علوم الحديث" لابن كثير (ص 63).

17 - Ibn Abi Hatim, Muqaddima "Al-'Ilal" (pp. 3, 4).

¹⁷ - مقدمة "العلل" لابن أبي حاتم (ص 3، 4).

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¹⁸ - "معرفة علوم الحديث" للحاكم (ص 113).

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