



Sanad, Matn and Meaning: Methodological Reconsideration in Modern Hadith Criticism

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Abstract

Hadith criticism continues to face a methodological tension between verifying historical transmission, evaluating textual coherence, and determining normative applicability in changing social contexts. This study aims to reconstruct major developments in classical and modern hadith criticism, identify the limitations of approaches that isolate sanad, matn, or contextual meaning, and formulate an integrated framework capable of connecting these dimensions. It employs a qualitative textual design combining historical criticism, comparative methodological analysis, document analysis, and hadith hermeneutics. The corpus includes classical hadith-critical literature, modern historical-critical scholarship, Muslim reformist writings, and maqāṣid-oriented studies. The findings show that classical criticism was not exclusively sanad-centred because matn analysis was embedded in the evaluation of anomalous reports, hidden defects, conflicting transmissions, and textual variants. Modern historical criticism expanded attention to common links, transmission networks, textual formation, and source dating, while Muslim hermeneutical approaches emphasized Qur'anic coherence, historical context, Prophetic purpose, and ethical consequences. However, these approaches often remain methodologically fragmented. The study therefore proposes an Integrated Circular Model in which sanad functions as the historical anchor, matn as the textual and epistemic test, and meaning as the contextual-normative dimension. Application to the Abū Bakrah hadith on women's political leadership demonstrates that historical attribution does not automatically establish universal applicability. The study contributes a recursive methodology that distinguishes and reintegrates authenticity, interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability while avoiding both radical skepticism and ahistorical literalism.

Keywords: hadith criticism, sanad, matn, contextual interpretation, women's political leadership

Introduction

Hadith occupies a foundational yet methodologically contested position in Islamic intellectual history. Reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad have contributed to the formation of Islamic law, theology, ethics, ritual practice, education, political thought, and conceptions of exemplary conduct. Their authority, however, has never depended solely on the presence of words attributed to the Prophet. It has also relied on scholarly judgments



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concerning the historical reliability of transmission, the stability and coherence of the reported text, and the meaning legitimately derived from it. A hadith is therefore simultaneously a transmitted report, a textual construction, and an object of interpretation. Its study requires answers to at least three related but analytically distinct questions: whether a report can reasonably be attributed to its stated source, what textual form was transmitted, and how that report should function normatively in contexts different from the one in which it originated.¹

The importance of these questions has intensified under contemporary social and technological conditions. Digital databases have made large hadith collections searchable across languages and editions, while social media, online preaching, mobile applications, and automated religious question-and-answer services have enabled individual reports to circulate beyond the scholarly environments in which they were traditionally studied. Hadith excerpts are frequently detached from their chapters, variant transmissions, legal commentaries, and historical circumstances before being applied to questions of gender, medicine, politics, education, interreligious relations, and personal morality. Research on Islamic learning in digital environments shows that online media have broadened access to religious knowledge while also renegotiating the authority of scholars and institutions.² More recent studies demonstrate that platform-based religious communication can amplify decontextualized content, uncertain expertise, and simplified doctrinal claims that existing regulatory and educational structures are not always equipped to address.³ The methodological criticism of hadith is consequently no longer an exclusively philological issue. It has become relevant to religious authority, public ethics, Islamic education, digital literacy, and the production of Muslim social knowledge.

Classical Muslim scholars developed one of the most elaborate systems of source verification in premodern intellectual history. The *sanad*, more commonly termed *isnād* in international scholarship, identified the chain through which a report was transmitted, whereas the *matn* contained its substantive wording. Through biographical dictionaries, narrator evaluation, comparison of transmission routes, and investigation of hidden defects, hadith critics examined continuity of transmission, narrator probity, accuracy, contradiction, and textual or transmissional irregularity. The formal definition of an authentic report incorporated not only continuity and narrator reliability but also freedom from *shudhūdh* and hidden defects. It is therefore inaccurate to characterize the classical tradition as entirely indifferent to *matn* criticism. Evidence from formative hadith scholarship indicates that early critics did evaluate textual content, although such criticism was often expressed through the technical language of transmitter error, anomalous narration, or concealed defect rather than through an autonomous theory of content criticism.⁴

¹ Belal Abu-Alabbas, Christopher Melchert, and Michael Dann, *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

² Gary R Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Dindin Solahudin and Moch. Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010019>.

³ M Kholili, A Izudin, and M L Hakim, "Islamic Proselytizing in Digital Religion in Indonesia: The Challenges of Broadcasting Regulation," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2357460, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2357460>.

⁴ Belal Abu-Alabbas, "The Principles of Hadith Criticism in the Writings of Al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim," *Islamic Law and Society* 24, no. 4 (2017): 311–35.

Nevertheless, a methodological tension remained between establishing the provenance of a report and determining its normative applicability. The validation of a chain could provide evidence that a particular wording circulated through an identifiable transmission network, but it could not by itself establish that every possible literal interpretation represented a universal and timeless rule. Conversely, a text that appeared morally persuasive or consistent with contemporary values could not be attributed to the Prophet without historical evidence. The central problem is therefore not whether sanad or matn should be prioritized absolutely. It is how historical attribution, textual evaluation, and interpretation should interact without collapsing into one another. When authenticity is equated automatically with universal applicability, historical reports risk being detached from genre, context, and the different capacities in which the Prophet spoke or acted. When meaning is determined exclusively by contemporary ethical preferences, however, interpretation risks becoming disconnected from transmission evidence and the semantic constraints of the report itself.

Modern Western hadith scholarship intensified this problem by questioning the historical reliability of the transmitted corpus. Ignaz Goldziher treated many hadiths as reflections of political, theological, and legal developments within the early Muslim community rather than direct records of the Prophet's words. Joseph Schacht extended this skepticism to legal traditions, arguing that doctrines developed by later jurists were projected backward through increasingly complete chains of transmission. G. H. A. Juynboll further developed common-link analysis to identify transmitters around whom multiple chains appeared to converge.⁵ These approaches made enduring contributions by directing attention to anachronism, transmission patterns, legal controversy, and the social production of authoritative reports. Yet their more radical formulations frequently treated the appearance of later doctrinal interests as sufficient evidence against earlier transmission, thereby risking a presumption of fabrication rather than an open investigation of the historical evidence.

Subsequent scholarship has complicated both uncritical traditional acceptance and generalized revisionist skepticism. Harald Motzki's source-critical studies demonstrated that early compilations could preserve differentiated transmission strata and that the combined analysis of chains and textual variants could sometimes date traditions earlier than Schacht's model allowed. The *isnād-cum-matn* method compares clusters of transmission routes with corresponding variations in wording to assess whether textual differences correlate with identifiable transmitters. Gregor Schoeler's work on oral and written transmission likewise challenges the assumption that oral circulation and textual preservation were mutually exclusive. Early Islamic knowledge was transmitted through changing combinations of audition, memorization, notebooks, teaching sessions, and written recension.⁶ Contemporary hadith studies have accordingly moved beyond a single controversy about whether "hadith

⁵ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950); G H A Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁶ Harald Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

is authentic” toward more differentiated questions concerning particular reports, collections, transmitters, textual families, interpretive communities, and historical uses.⁷

This methodological development is significant because it confirms that sanad and matn cannot be investigated as independent evidentiary units. Chains acquire historical significance when compared across textual variants, while variants become historically meaningful when mapped onto their transmission networks. The *isnād-cum-matn* approach therefore offers a more balanced procedure for reconstructing the circulation of a report. It does not prove automatically that every common element originated with the Prophet, nor does it reduce every common link to an inventor. Instead, it makes historical conclusions dependent on the distribution, wording, chronology, and independence of the available evidence. Recent methodological discussions continue to regard the combined use of sanad and matn as one of the most important alternatives to both credulous acceptance and wholesale skepticism.

A different but related development occurred among modern Muslim reformist scholars. Fazlur Rahman distinguished between hadith as historically transmitted formulations and the Sunnah as the normative moral trajectory embodied by Prophetic practice. His concept of the “living Sunnah” sought to recover the moral purpose of Prophetic guidance rather than reproduce every historical formulation without contextual analysis.⁸ Muhammad al-Ghazali argued that a report should not be applied in isolation from the Qur’an, established historical knowledge, sound reasoning, and the wider purposes of Islam. Yusuf al-Qaradawi similarly emphasized thematic collection, contextual interpretation, differentiation between changing means and enduring purposes, and attention to the various capacities in which the Prophet acted. Maqāṣid-oriented scholarship further developed the proposition that legal interpretation must consider systemic coherence, justice, human dignity, welfare, and the consequences of application rather than treating individual texts atomistically.⁹ These approaches have been especially influential in debates involving gender, governance, medical practice, social customs, and the distinction between universal legislation and context-dependent Prophetic policy.

Modern contextual approaches nevertheless generate their own methodological difficulties. Appeals to reason, science, universal values, or maqāṣid may become indeterminate unless the hierarchy of evidence and procedures of interpretation are explained clearly. A report should not be rejected merely because its wording appears unfamiliar to modern readers, just as it should not be universalized merely because its chain satisfies formal authenticity requirements. The category of “meaning” must therefore be methodologically constrained. It requires examination of linguistic usage, textual genre, variant wording, immediate occasion, broader sociohistorical conditions, the report’s relation to Qur’anic principles and other hadiths, and the capacity in which the Prophet was speaking. It must also distinguish at least three judgments that are often conflated: historical authenticity,

⁷ Abu-Alabbas, Melchert, and Dann, *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches*.

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965).

⁹ Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth* (Dār al-Shurūq, 2001); Yūsuf Al-Qaradāwī, *Kayfa Nata’āmal Ma’a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah: Ma’ālim Wa Ḍawābiṭ* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1990); Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law* (London: IIIT, 2008).

interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability. A report may be historically early but contextually limited; textually stable but nonlegislative; ethically instructive but not legally coercive; or uncertain in attribution yet historically important for understanding later Muslim thought.

Existing scholarship has thus produced substantial advances, but its major approaches frequently remain methodologically compartmentalized. Classical hadith criticism offers refined tools for transmitter evaluation and the detection of anomalous transmission but does not always articulate a comprehensive procedure for translating historical authentication into contemporary normative application. Western historical criticism has developed powerful methods of dating, source comparison, and transmission analysis but often brackets the theological and ethical question of how Muslims may understand a report once its historical formation has been reconstructed. Modern Muslim hermeneutics foregrounds Qur'anic coherence, historical context, and moral purpose but may begin its interpretive work after accepting inherited authenticity classifications, without systematically reinvestigating the relationship between textual variants and transmission networks. Contemporary studies therefore tend to answer one of three questions where a report came from, whether its wording is coherent, or what it should mean without sufficiently integrating all three within a single analytical procedure.

This constitutes the principal research gap addressed by the present study. The problem is not the complete absence of sanad criticism, matn criticism, contextual interpretation, or maqāṣid analysis. Each already possesses a substantial literature. The unresolved issue is the absence of a sufficiently explicit framework that treats provenance, textual form, and normative meaning as interdependent yet non-identical dimensions of hadith criticism. Sequential models commonly authenticate the sanad first, assess the matn second, and interpret the report only after the first two stages have been completed. Such linearity prevents later findings from modifying earlier judgments. A contextual inconsistency may reveal a hidden problem in transmission; a recurrent textual variation may change the reconstruction of a report's historical setting; and a distinction between Prophetic legislation and political judgment may alter its normative status without requiring rejection of its historical attribution. A more adequate methodology must therefore be recursive rather than merely sequential.

To address this gap, the article develops an Integrated Circular Model of Sanad, Matn, and Meaning. The first dimension, sanad as a historical anchor, examines transmission continuity, narrator evaluation, network configuration, common links, textual families, and the correlation between chains and variants. The second dimension, matn as textual and epistemic evaluation, investigates wording, internal coherence, anomalies, hidden defects, intertextual relations, historical plausibility, and compatibility with established Qur'anic principles. The third dimension, meaning as contextual-normative interpretation, reconstructs micro- and macro-contexts of emergence, distinguishes between legislative, judicial, political, advisory, and ordinary human actions of the Prophet, and evaluates the report's application through maqāṣid and the consequences of interpretation. The model is circular because conclusions at each dimension remain open to revision through evidence produced at the other dimensions. It neither assumes that an authentic sanad guarantees every literal application nor allows contemporary moral judgment to replace historical criticism.

Accordingly, this study asks three focused questions: how have classical Muslim criticism, Western historical-critical scholarship, and modern Muslim hermeneutics conceptualized the relationship among sanad, matn, and meaning? what methodological limitations arise when historical attribution, textual coherence, and normative applicability are examined separately or arranged in a rigid hierarchy? how can an integrated circular model combine transmission analysis, textual criticism, and contextual-maqāṣid interpretation while avoiding both radical skepticism and ahistorical literalism? Correspondingly, the study aims to reconstruct the principal methodological shifts in modern hadith criticism, identify the strengths and limitations of the dominant approaches, formulate an operational model connecting sanad, matn, and meaning, and demonstrate its analytical relevance through the contested hadith concerning women's political leadership.

The academic significance of the study lies in repositioning modern hadith criticism as an interdisciplinary inquiry into historical evidence, textual formation, and normative interpretation. Its theoretical contribution is the separation and subsequent reintegration of three judgments that are frequently conflated: authenticity, meaning, and applicability. Its international relevance extends to Islamic law, religious ethics, gender studies, education, digital religion, and the study of scriptural authority, where scholars repeatedly confront the problem of translating historically situated texts into contemporary norms. The study's explicit novelty therefore does not consist merely in advocating greater attention to matn or context. It lies in proposing a recursive methodological architecture in which sanad, matn, and meaning mutually test and revise one another. This approach seeks to preserve the evidentiary discipline of classical hadith scholarship, incorporate the historical sensitivity of modern source criticism, and constrain contextual interpretation through transparent hermeneutical and maqāṣid-based criteria.

Method

This study employed a qualitative textual research design integrating historical criticism, comparative methodological analysis, and hadith hermeneutics. This design was selected because the study does not seek to measure social attitudes or test statistical relationships, but to reconstruct the methodological relationship among sanad, matn, and meaning in classical and modern hadith criticism. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate for examining how scholarly texts construct concepts, evidentiary standards, interpretive procedures, and claims of religious authority.¹⁰ The historical-critical component was used to investigate the transmission and textual formation of hadith, while the hermeneutical component examined how historically situated reports are interpreted and translated into contemporary normative judgments.

The primary corpus was divided into three categories. The first consisted of classical works on hadith methodology dealing with continuity of transmission, narrator reliability, anomalous reports, hidden defects, and conflicting traditions. These sources included representative discussions of *muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth*, *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*, *ʿilal al-ḥadīth*, and *mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*. Classical hadith criticism was not treated as exclusively sanad-centred because early scholars also evaluated textual anomalies, contradictions, and concealed defects, although

¹⁰ Glenn A Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

matn criticism was often expressed through the language of transmission error and narrator evaluation.¹¹

The second category comprised modern Muslim scholarship that expanded the role of matn criticism and contextual interpretation. The principal sources included Muhammad al-Ghazālī's *Al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī's *Kayfa Nata'āmal ma'a al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*, Fazlur Rahman's writings on the living Sunnah, and contemporary maqāṣid-oriented scholarship. These works were selected because they evaluate hadith through Qur'anic coherence, historical context, rational analysis, Prophetic purpose, and the broader objectives of Islamic law.¹²

The third category included modern historical-critical studies concerning the development of isnād, common-link analysis, oral and written transmission, source dating, and *isnād-cum-matn* analysis. Particular attention was given to scholarship demonstrating that transmission chains and textual variants should be studied comparatively rather than as separate units of evidence.¹³ Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs were used as secondary sources to contextualize methodological debates and identify competing interpretations.

Sources were included when they met four criteria. First, they directly addressed at least one analytical dimension of the study: historical transmission, textual evaluation, or contextual-normative meaning. Second, they articulated an identifiable methodology rather than merely offering devotional or descriptive discussions of hadith. Third, modern sources were included when they represented influential positions within Muslim reformist, historical-critical, or hermeneutical scholarship. Fourth, the sources had to be available in complete and academically verifiable editions. Anonymous online opinions, incomplete quotations, popular religious content without methodological explanation, and works unrelated to hadith authentication or interpretation were excluded. Arabic texts were consulted in their original language whenever possible, while reliable English and Indonesian translations were used to clarify technical terminology and compare interpretive choices.

The analytical procedure consisted of four stages. The first stage involved directed qualitative coding of the selected texts. Categories included sanad continuity, narrator reliability, transmission networks, common links, matn variation, anomaly, hidden defect, Qur'anic coherence, historical context, Prophetic capacity, maqāṣid, universality, and normative applicability. Directed coding was used because the study began with theoretically defined categories while remaining open to additional concepts emerging from the corpus.¹⁴

The second stage compared classical Muslim hadith criticism, Western historical-critical scholarship, and modern Muslim hermeneutics. Each approach was examined according to its principal research question, unit of analysis, evidentiary criteria, interpretive

¹¹ Abu-Alabbas, "The Principles of Hadith Criticism in the Writings of Al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim"; J A C Brown, "How We Know Early Hadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's so Hard to Find," *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2008): 143–84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851908X290574>.

¹² Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth*; Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*; Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa Nata'āmal Ma'a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah: Ma'ālim Wa Ḍawābiṭ*; Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law*.

¹³ Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*.

¹⁴ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>; Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Sage, 2012).

assumptions, strengths, and methodological limitations. The comparison did not assume that these traditions were internally uniform. Instead, it identified recurring tendencies such as transmitter-centred verification, skepticism toward backward-projected chains, comparative analysis of textual variants, Qur'anic evaluation, contextual interpretation, and maqāṣid-based reasoning.

The third stage operationalized the proposed Integrated Circular Model of Sanad, Matn, and Meaning. Sanad functioned as the historical anchor and was assessed through continuity, narrator evaluation, chronology, transmission routes, common links, and correlations between chains and textual variants. Matn analysis examined lexical variation, internal coherence, contradiction, historical plausibility, consistency with Qur'anic principles, and comparison with stronger reports. Meaning analysis reconstructed the immediate occasion and broader sociopolitical context of the report. It also distinguished whether the Prophet acted as messenger, judge, political leader, adviser, or ordinary human actor and assessed contemporary applicability through maqāṣid-based reasoning.

The model was circular because conclusions at one level could revise findings at another. A textual anomaly could require renewed examination of a transmitter, while historical reconstruction could modify the apparent universality of a report. The model therefore distinguished historical attribution, interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability without separating them completely. The fourth stage applied the model to the hadith attributed to Abū Bakrah concerning a community that entrusts its affairs to a woman. This report was selected purposively because it is canonically authenticated but remains contested in discussions of women's political leadership. Its transmission, wording, Qur'anic coherence, political context, and normative classification were examined to demonstrate the operational value of the proposed framework.

Interpretive credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, comparison of opposing scholarly positions, documentation of analytical decisions, and negative-case analysis.¹⁵ The study used publicly available texts and involved no human participants. Its main limitation is that the application of the model to one contested report cannot establish its suitability for every hadith genre. Further studies should test the model on legal, medical, theological, eschatological, and ethical traditions.

Results and Discussion

Reassessing Classical Hadith Criticism: Sanad Verification and Embedded Matn Analysis

The first principal finding is that classical hadith criticism cannot be adequately described as a sanad-centred procedure that evaluated transmitters while disregarding the content of the transmitted report. The sanad undeniably occupied a foundational position because the initial task of hadith critics was to determine whether a report could plausibly be connected to the Prophet, a Companion, or another early authority. This task required the examination of continuity, narrator probity, precision, opportunities for transmission, and the relationship between individual narrators and wider networks of transmission. However, these criteria did not operate independently of the matn. Evaluating a narrator's accuracy frequently required critics to compare the wording that the narrator transmitted with the

¹⁵ Yvonna S Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Sage Publications, 1985); Sarah J Tracy, "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 10 (2010): 837–51.

versions preserved by other authorities. Classical criticism was therefore relational: the reliability of a chain was assessed partly through the textual evidence carried by that chain.¹⁶

This interdependence is particularly visible in the classical requirements that an authentic hadith be free from *shudhūdh* and concealed *‘illah*. A report could possess an apparently continuous chain composed of generally reliable transmitters but still be rejected when its wording or transmission pattern contradicted stronger evidence. *Shudhūdh* did not merely designate unusual content; it described a narration’s problematic position within a comparative transmission system. Recent analysis of classical critical terminology confirms that singularity alone did not necessarily make a report anomalous. The judgment depended on whether the singular version conflicted significantly with stronger transmitters or whether contextual evidence justified preferring another version.¹⁷ Detecting *shudhūdh* therefore required critics to assemble multiple routes, compare their wording, and evaluate the relative weight of the evidence rather than simply consult the biographical status of one transmitter.

The investigation of *‘illah* likewise demonstrates that sanad criticism included close attention to textual form. A concealed defect might consist of a disconnected chain presented as continuous, a statement of a Companion elevated to the Prophet, the substitution of one transmitter for another, or an addition preserved only in a particular version. Such defects were often invisible when one chain was considered in isolation. They emerged through *jam‘ al-ṭuruq*, the collection and comparison of transmission routes. Comparative opposition, or *mu‘āraḍah*, consequently became an important procedure for identifying inconsistencies within both chains and texts.¹⁸ Studies of *shādh* and *‘illah* further show that the authenticity of the matn depended on structured comparison, although later manuals did not always standardize this evaluative process in a single autonomous theory of textual criticism.¹⁹

Brown’s study of formative Sunni hadith criticism provides a major correction to the claim that early critics examined only isnāds. By comparing reports criticized in third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century transmitter-evaluation works with reports later identified explicitly as fabricated or textually unacceptable, Brown finds substantial evidence that early critics did reject reports partly because of their content. Nevertheless, they often expressed these objections through the technical vocabulary of narrator error, unsupported transmission, *munkar* narration, or hidden defects. Matn criticism was therefore frequently concealed within the discourse of isnād criticism rather than presented as a separate rational test. Brown argues that this rhetorical pattern contributed to the later impression that traditionists avoided content criticism altogether.²⁰

¹⁶ Abu-Alabbas, “The Principles of Hadith Criticism in the Writings of Al-Shāfi‘ī and Muslim”; Brown, “How We Know Early Hadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It’s so Hard to Find.”

¹⁷ S V E S Nega, “Al-Shudhūdh in Hadith Criticism among Hadith Scholars: A Descriptive and Analytical Study,” *Journal of Islamic Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2026): 38–54, <https://doi.org/10.26389/AJSRP.S140126>.

¹⁸ H Rajab, “Mu‘āraḍah Sebagai Metode Memahami ‘illah Pada Matan Hadis,” *Jurnal Al-Mubarak: Jurnal Kajian Al-Qur’an Dan Tafsir* 6, no. 1 (2021): 93–113, <https://doi.org/10.47435/al-mubarak.v6i1.539>.

¹⁹ R Efendi, Rani, and S Anam, “Menakar Kesahihan Matan Hadis: Telaah Atas Shādh Dan ‘illah,” *Journal of Hadith Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022): 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.32506/johs.v5i1-04>.

²⁰ Brown, “How We Know Early Hadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It’s so Hard to Find.”

Abu-Alabbas's comparison of al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim further indicates that formative hadith criticism operated through relatively consistent comparative principles. Despite differences in genre and scholarly purpose, both scholars evaluated reports by examining corroboration, narrator competence, contradiction, and unsupported singularity. Their approaches suggest that hadith criticism was not simply a mechanical application of later textbook definitions. Rather, it consisted of practical judgments about how particular narrations related to broader bodies of evidence. The agreement between al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim also indicates that the early critical system likely developed before either scholar and was shared across the emerging fields of hadith and jurisprudence.²¹

The existence of *mukhtalif al-ḥadīth* and *mushkil al-ḥadīth* provides additional evidence that classical scholarship did not end with sanad verification. These disciplines addressed reports that appeared to contradict the Qur'an, other hadiths, established doctrine, reason, linguistic convention, or observable reality. Classical scholars responded through reconciliation, specification, chronological ordering, abrogation, preference, or figurative interpretation. Ibn Qutaybah's treatment of apparently contradictory reports, for example, employed linguistic analysis, legal reasoning, theological argument, and contextual interpretation to defend the intelligibility of transmitted traditions.²² These practices demonstrate that classical scholars recognized semantic and theological problems within hadith texts and developed interpretive tools to resolve them.

Nevertheless, *ʿilal al-ḥadīth* and *mukhtalif al-ḥadīth* should not be conflated. The former primarily investigates whether a report has been transmitted accurately, whereas the latter generally begins with reports already regarded as authoritative and seeks to explain their apparent contradictions. A comparative study of the two disciplines shows that matn analysis serves different purposes within each: in *ʿilal*, textual variation may expose an error in transmission; in *mukhtalif*, textual interpretation seeks to harmonize or prioritize reports whose authority has already been substantially accepted.²³ This distinction is methodologically important because it separates authentication from interpretation, even though the two processes often overlap in practice.

The broader classical legal tradition also shows that the authority of a hadith depended on more than its formal authentication. Jurists examined whether reports established general rules, whether they conflicted with legal maxims or established practice, and whether their scope was limited by other evidence. Rabb's historical study of the maxim concerning avoidance of fixed punishments in cases of doubt demonstrates that a principle could become widely attributed to the Prophet in later juristic literature even when earlier legal authorities did not consistently present it as a Prophetic hadith. The example shows that transmission, legal reception, and normative authority could develop along different historical trajectories.²⁴

²¹ Abu-Alabbas, "The Principles of Hadith Criticism in the Writings of Al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim."

²² Abdul Muiz Ghazali, "Ibn Qutaiba Al-Dīnawarī Wa Manhaj Al-Ta'wīl Fī Fiqh Mukhtalif Al-Ḥadīth Wa Āthāruhu Al-ʿilmiyyah Fī Al-ʿālam Al-Islāmī Wa Indūnisiyā," *JAWI* 1, no. 1 (2018): 67–106, <https://doi.org/10.24042/jw.v1i1.2865>.

²³ D H Dzulraidi, "Metodologi Kritik Matan Dalam ʿilal Al-Ḥadīth Dan Mukhtalif Al-Ḥadīth: Satu Kajian Perbandingan," *Journal of Fatwa and Falak Selangor* 1, no. 2 (2024): 66–90.

²⁴ Intisar A Rabb, "Islamic Legal Maxims as Substantive Canons of Construction: Ḥudūd-Avoidance in Cases of Doubt," *Islamic Law and Society* 17, no. 1 (2010): 63–125, <https://doi.org/10.1163/092893809X12472107043920>.

Similarly, Patel's study of the hadith concerning imitation of non-Muslims shows that the authority and meaning of a report were shaped through transmission, canonization, commentary, law, ethics, and changing social contexts. The report did not possess one self-evident meaning merely because it was included in a recognized collection. Its normative scope was constructed through interpretive traditions extending across multiple literary genres.²⁵ Studies of theological hadiths also demonstrate that scholars employed figurative interpretation and doctrinal reasoning when literal readings produced anthropomorphic implications, confirming that authenticated transmission did not eliminate interpretive negotiation.²⁶

Genre further affected the preservation and meaning of transmitted material. Research on the relationship between *maghāzī* and hadith indicates that similar historical materials could be organized differently according to the aims of biographical narrative and normative hadith compilation. These genres influenced one another but retained distinctive structures and interpretive priorities.²⁷ The removal of a report from a chronological narrative and its placement within a legal or thematic chapter could transform how later readers understood its significance. Classical matn criticism must therefore be supplemented by attention to compilation, chapter organization, and the changing literary environments in which reports were transmitted.

The analysis nevertheless identifies a continuing methodological limitation. Classical criticism developed highly refined procedures for determining whether a report had been preserved accurately, but it did not always formulate a systematic distinction between historical authenticity and universal normative applicability. A statement might be reliably attributable to the Prophet while representing a judicial decision, military strategy, political assessment, personal preference, medical recommendation, or response to a specific circumstance. The authentication of its transmission cannot by itself establish that the statement constitutes universal legislation.

The theoretical implication is that the Integrated Circular Model developed in this study should be understood as an extension, not a repudiation, of classical criticism. Classical comparison of routes, detection of *shudhūdh*, identification of *'illah*, and resolution of textual conflict provide the historical foundation of the model. What must be made more explicit is the distinction among accurate transmission, plausible interpretation, and normative applicability. The principal finding is therefore that classical hadith critics practiced meaningful matn analysis, but primarily within a framework concerned with preservation, transmission accuracy, and textual reconciliation. A future-oriented hadith methodology

²⁵ Youshaa Patel, "'Whoever Imitates a People Becomes One of Them': A Hadith and Its Interpreters," *Islamic Law and Society* 25, no. 4 (2018): 359–426, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00254A01>.

²⁶ U M Noor and U A Hamdi, "Resisting Anthropomorphism: Evaluation of Abū Sulaymān Al-Khaṭṭābī's (d. 388/998) Approach to Ṣifāt Traditions," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 21, no. 1–2 (2022): 12–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2021.1979304>.

²⁷ Andreas Görke, "The Relationship between Maghāzī and Ḥadīth in Early Islamic Scholarship," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74, no. 2 (2011): 171–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X11000012>; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Maghāzī and the Muḥaddithūn: Reconsidering the Treatment of 'Historical' Materials in Early Collections of Hadith," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800062759>.

must preserve that evidentiary discipline while adding transparent procedures for determining whether an authenticated report is universal, contextual, advisory, political, or otherwise limited in normative scope.

From Historical Skepticism to Contextual Interpretation: Modern Reconfigurations of Hadith Criticism

The second principal finding is that modern hadith criticism did not develop through a single linear shift from traditional acceptance to critical analysis. It emerged through competing projects that asked different questions about the hadith corpus. Western historical-critical scholars primarily investigated when reports arose, how transmission networks developed, and whether Prophetic attribution could be historically established. Modern Muslim reformers were generally more concerned with how authenticated reports should be interpreted in relation to the Qur'an, reason, ethical purpose, and changing social conditions. More recent scholarship has attempted to mediate between these orientations by combining transmission analysis, textual comparison, and contextual interpretation. Modern hadith criticism is therefore best understood as a field of methodological pluralism rather than a unified alternative to classical scholarship.²⁸

The first reconfiguration arose from historical skepticism toward the reliability of the inherited corpus. Goldziher argued that many hadiths reflected political, theological, and legal controversies that developed after the Prophetic period. Instead of treating reports as transparent records of the Prophet's words, he read them as evidence of the evolving intellectual life of the early Muslim community.²⁹ Schacht radicalized this approach in his study of Islamic law. He maintained that many legal doctrines were first formulated by later jurists and subsequently projected backward through increasingly complete chains of authorities. His concepts of backward projection and the common link transformed the isnād from a guarantee of authenticity into evidence for identifying the stage at which a report entered wider circulation.³⁰

Juynboll further systematized common-link analysis by mapping the transmitter at whom multiple lines of transmission converged. In his interpretation, the common link often represented the scholar responsible for circulating or formulating a report rather than simply preserving an earlier tradition.³¹ Contemporary scholarship has shown, however, that the meaning of the common link remains contested. Aghaei's comparison of the modern category with classical terms such as *madār*, *gharīb*, and *tafarrud* demonstrates that Muslim critics recognized converging chains but did not necessarily draw the same conclusions concerning

²⁸ E Hamdeh, "Prophetic Hadith and the Qur'an-Only Movement: The Response of Muslim Scholars," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 7, no. 2 (2022): 107–19, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ims.2022.a896982>; Emad Hamdeh, "In Search of Authenticity: Modern Approaches toward Ḥadīth," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Reform*, ed. Emad Hamdeh and Natana J DeLong-Bas (Oxford University Press, 2026), 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197532805.013.22>; Abu-Alabbas, Melchert, and Dann, *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches*.

²⁹ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*.

³⁰ Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*.

³¹ Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith*.

invention or authorship.³² The common link may identify an important disseminator, collector, teacher, or textual stabilizer without proving that the report originated with that individual.

Historical skepticism made several enduring contributions. It directed attention to anachronism, doctrinal vocabulary, political interests, legal controversy, and the institutional conditions through which Prophetic authority was constructed. It also demonstrated that formal completeness of an isnād cannot automatically establish historical provenance. Nevertheless, radical skeptical models were frequently based on generalized assumptions, particularly the view that early transmission was predominantly oral, that complete chains necessarily represented later projection, or that the absence of a report from an earlier surviving source proved that the report did not yet exist. These assumptions risk converting methodological caution into a presumption of lateness or fabrication.

A second reconfiguration consequently emerged through source-critical approaches that questioned both traditional certainty and generalized skepticism. Motzki argued that hadith reports should be evaluated individually through detailed comparison of their chains, textual variants, and appearances in early compilations. His studies demonstrated that some materials preserved in later collections could be traced to substantially earlier teaching circles than Schacht's model allowed.³³ Rather than treating all complete isnāds as backward projections, Motzki investigated whether the distribution of variants corresponded meaningfully with particular transmitters. This approach shifted the debate from universal claims about the reliability or unreliability of hadith to report-specific historical reconstruction.

The resulting *isnād-cum-matn* method compares chains of transmission with differences and similarities in wording. When distinct students of a transmitter preserve related textual forms, and when those forms diverge in patterned ways across transmission branches, the correlation can provide evidence for an earlier common source. The method does not assume that a common link is necessarily the inventor of a report. It asks whether that transmitter functioned as an originator, collector, redactor, or major disseminator and how far the material can reasonably be dated.³⁴

Studies of early biographical and historical traditions have strengthened this intermediate position. Görke and Schoeler's analyses of reports associated with 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr compare multiple recensions, transmitters, narrative structures, and textual components. Their findings suggest that parts of the early Islamic historical tradition may preserve materials earlier than radical revisionist models had admitted, even though those

³² Ahmad Aghaei, "The Common Link and Its Relation to Hadith Terminology," in *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches*, ed. Belal Abu-Alabbas, Christopher Melchert, and Michael Dann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 97–128, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474441797.003.0006>.

³³ Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*.

³⁴ Pavel Pavlovitch, "Kunnā Nakrahu Al-Kitāb: Scripture, Transmission of Knowledge, and Politics in the Second Century AH (719–816 CE)," in *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches*, ed. Belal Abu-Alabbas, Christopher Melchert, and Michael Dann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 9–26, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474441797.003.0002>; Seyfettin Kara, *In Search of Ali Ibn Abi Talib's Codex: History and Traditions of the Earliest Copy of the Qur'an* (Gerlach Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9783959940559>.

materials underwent transmission, combination, and editorial development.³⁵ Such research does not restore an assumption that every canonical report is historically exact. It demonstrates that the evidentiary value of early Islamic traditions must be assessed through differentiated analysis rather than wholesale acceptance or rejection.

Schoeler's studies of oral and written transmission also challenge a rigid opposition between memory and writing. Early Islamic learning involved audition, recitation, personal notebooks, teaching copies, dictation, and later literary recension. Oral transmission could be supported by writing, while written texts remained embedded in performative teaching relationships.³⁶ The presence of textual variation therefore does not automatically demonstrate uncontrolled invention; it may reflect the interaction of memory, paraphrase, written aids, pedagogical abbreviation, and editorial arrangement. This insight broadens historical criticism from the question of whether a report was written to the more precise question of how different media shaped its preservation.

A third reconfiguration developed among modern Muslim scholars who focused on the normative problem of interpretation. Fazlur Rahman distinguished between individual hadith formulations and the broader moral-historical movement of the Sunnah. He regarded the Sunnah as a dynamic Prophetic model that was interpreted and extended by the early Muslim community rather than as an aggregation of atomized rules detached from history.³⁷ His approach shifted attention from reproducing particular formulations to reconstructing the moral purposes embodied in Prophetic practice. Subsequent assessments of Rahman emphasize that he combined historical consciousness with a scripture-centred ethical hermeneutic, seeking renewal through tradition rather than its simple abandonment.³⁸

Muhammad al-Ghazālī similarly argued that an apparently sound chain could not end interpretive inquiry. A report had to be considered alongside the Qur'an, stronger hadith evidence, established historical knowledge, rational judgment, and the consequences of its application.³⁹ Yusuf al-Qaradāwī developed a systematic contextual approach requiring thematic collection of related reports, differentiation between objectives and changing means, recognition of figurative language, and reconstruction of the circumstances in which a statement was made.⁴⁰

These Muslim reformist approaches made an essential distinction between the authenticity of a report and the universality of a particular interpretation. A hadith may be historically attributable yet directed toward a specific event, audience, political circumstance, customary practice, or practical instrument. Historicization therefore does not necessarily

³⁵ Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *The Earliest Writings on the Life of Muḥammad: The 'Urwa Corpus and the Non-Muslim Sources* (Gerlach Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9783959941273>.

³⁶ Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006); Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *Die Ältesten Berichte Über Das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus 'Urwa Ibn Az-Zubair* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2011).

³⁷ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*.

³⁸ Frederick M Denny, "The Legacy of Fazlur Rahman," in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Oxford University Press, 1991), 96–108, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195067286.003.0008>; Ebrahim Moosa, "Rahman, Fazlur," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.898>.

³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth*.

⁴⁰ Al-Qaradāwī, *Kayfa Nata'āmal Ma'a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah: Ma'ālim Wa Ḍawābiṭ*.

negate Prophetic authority; it may identify the level at which that authority operates. Modernist interpretation, however, also creates methodological risks when broad concepts such as reason, justice, science, or universal values are invoked without transparent criteria. Contextual interpretation can become selective when it begins from a desired contemporary conclusion and searches retrospectively for justification.⁴¹

The comparative analysis therefore reveals a persistent fragmentation. Historical-critical scholarship offers sophisticated procedures for dating and reconstructing transmission but may suspend the theological and normative question of how Muslims should live with a historically situated report. Muslim contextualism addresses ethical relevance and legal application but may accept inherited authenticity classifications without re-examining textual families and transmission networks. Traditional revivalist projects strengthen sanad authentication yet may insufficiently distinguish reliable attribution from universal legislation.⁴² The principal analytical point is that modern hadith criticism has produced indispensable but incomplete methodological advances. Its future development requires integrating historical provenance, textual formation, and contextual-normative meaning without allowing any one dimension to replace the others.

The Integrated Circular Model: A Recursive Relationship among Sanad, Matn, and Meaning

The third principal finding is that sanad, matn, and meaning must be treated as interdependent but analytically distinguishable dimensions of hadith criticism. This finding challenges the linear model in which sanad authentication is completed first, the matn is subsequently accepted as a stable text, and contemporary meaning is determined only after both stages have been closed. Such a sequence creates the impression that findings at the level of textual variation or historical context cannot affect an earlier judgment about transmission. The Integrated Circular Model proposed in this study instead treats hadith criticism as a recursive process: evidence identified at any analytical level may require the reconsideration of conclusions reached at another. The model therefore preserves the discipline of source verification while rejecting the assumption that sanad, matn, and interpretation can be finalized independently of one another.

Within the model, sanad functions as the historical anchor. Its purpose is not merely to classify individual transmitters as reliable or unreliable, but to reconstruct the historical movement of a report. The analysis includes continuity, narrator chronology, opportunities for direct transmission, geographical mobility, transmission networks, common links, and the distribution of variants among particular branches of the sanad. Classical critics already recognized that judgments about narrators depended partly on comparison between the reports they transmitted, while modern *isnād-cum-matn* analysis has made the correlation between transmission routes and textual variants more methodologically explicit.⁴³ Kara

⁴¹ D W Brown, "Western Hadith Studies," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Hadith*, 2019, 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118638477.ch2>; Monica M Ringer, *Islamic Modernism and the Re-Enchantment of the Sacred in the Age of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474478731.001.0001>.

⁴² Hamdeh, "Prophetic Hadith and the Qur'ān-Only Movement: The Response of Muslim Scholars."

⁴³ Abu-Alabbas, "The Principles of Hadith Criticism in the Writings of Al-Shāfi'ī and Muslim"; Brown, "How We Know Early Hadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's so Hard to Find."

similarly explains that approaches using isnād and matn together can address weaknesses associated with methods based exclusively on wording, collection chronology, or transmission chains.⁴⁴

Sanad analysis consequently produces a qualified judgment of historical attribution, not an absolute declaration of certainty. It asks how securely a report can be traced to a particular transmitter, teaching circle, generation, or historical period. A common link may represent an originator, major disseminator, collector, or textual stabilizer; it should not automatically be identified as the inventor of the report. Likewise, a continuous chain does not by itself establish that every word of the matn originated in precisely the form preserved by a later collection. Schoeler's research on oral and written transmission demonstrates that early Islamic knowledge circulated through interacting practices of audition, memorization, personal notes, teaching copies, recitation, and literary redaction. Transmission history must therefore accommodate both continuity and controlled textual development.⁴⁵

Matn functions as the textual and epistemic test within the model. It examines lexical variation, syntax, additions, omissions, inversions, anomalous expressions, concealed defects, internal coherence, and relationships with parallel reports. Matn analysis also considers linguistic convention, genre, historical plausibility, Qur'anic principles, and the placement of a report within a compiler's chapter structure. This stage does not simply ask whether the content appears acceptable to a contemporary reader. It reconstructs the most evidentially supported textual form and determines which interpretation best explains the available variants. Brown's findings demonstrate that early hadith critics already engaged in content-sensitive criticism, although they often expressed their judgments through the terminology of transmitter error, *munkar* reports, *shudhūdh*, and hidden defects.⁴⁶

Textual criticism must also account for the interpretive histories through which hadiths acquire authority. A report does not operate normatively through wording alone; its meaning is shaped by canonization, chapter arrangement, commentary, jurisprudence, theology, and ethical literature. Patel's study of the hadith concerning imitation shows that transmission, classification, and subsequent interpretation may produce different trajectories of authority across time. Similarly, Blecher and Brinkmann describe hadith commentary as a cumulative and transregional practice extending beyond simple line-by-line explanation. The Integrated Circular Model therefore treats commentary and reception as relevant evidence without assuming that later interpretive consensus necessarily represents the only plausible meaning of the original report.⁴⁷

The third dimension, meaning, functions as the contextual and normative evaluation of the report. It reconstructs both the immediate setting of an utterance and the broader political, social, legal, and cultural environment in which it occurred. This stage examines the

⁴⁴ Kara, *In Search of Ali Ibn Abi Talib's Codex: History and Traditions of the Earliest Copy of the Qur'an*.

⁴⁵ Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*; Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muhammad: Nature and Authenticity* (Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203850060>.

⁴⁶ Brown, "How We Know Early Hadith Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's so Hard to Find."

⁴⁷ Michał Bednarkiewicz, Abdulaziz Qurboniev, and Gowaart Van Den Bossche, "Studying Hadith Commentaries in the Digital Age," in *Hadith Commentary: Continuity and Change*, ed. Joel Blecher and Stefanie Brinkmann (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 263–80, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474461061-014>; Patel, "'Whoever Imitates a People Becomes One of Them': A Hadith and Its Interpreters."

report's audience, triggering circumstances, communicative purpose, genre, and relation to other Prophetic practices. It also asks in which capacity the Prophet spoke or acted: as the conveyor of revelation, judge, political leader, military commander, adviser, community educator, or human participant in a particular social environment. Distinguishing these capacities is essential because not every historically authentic Prophetic statement carries the same legislative scope.

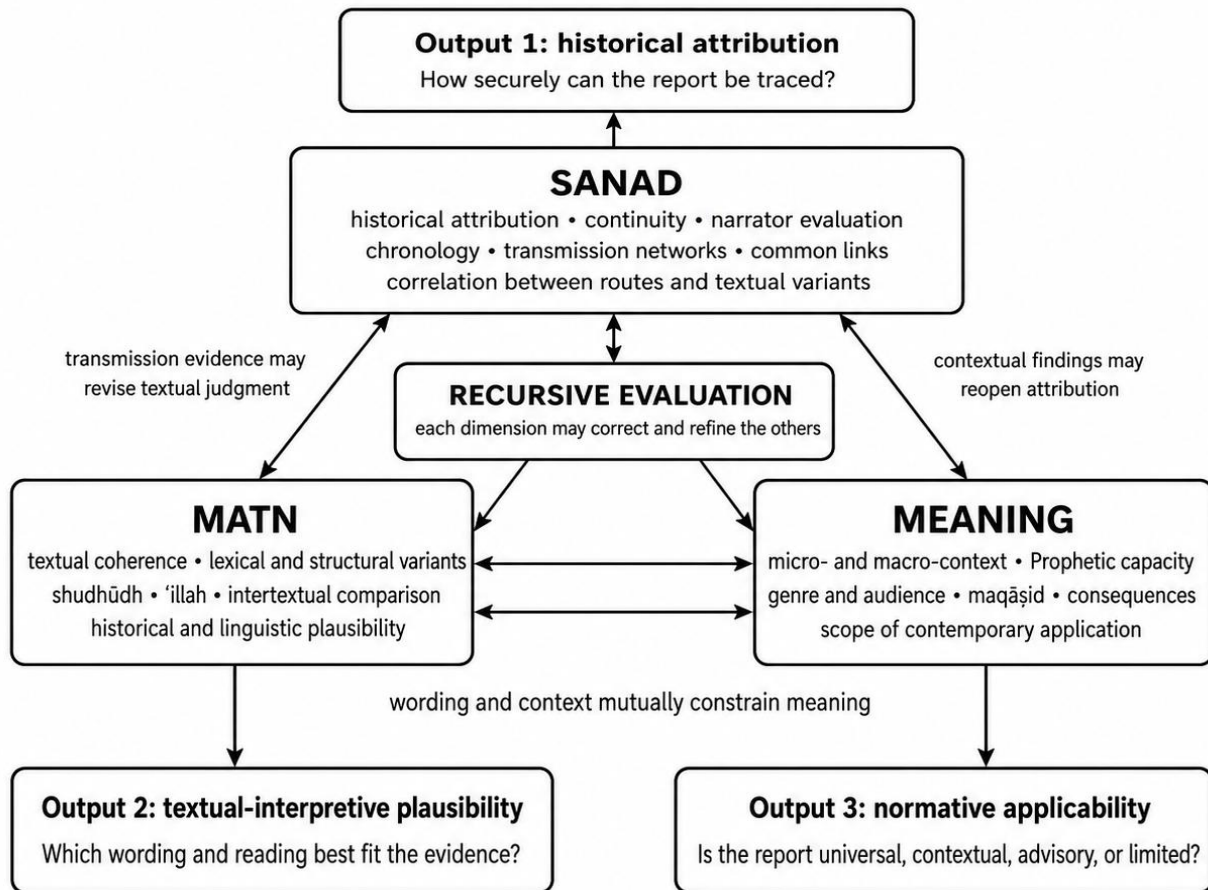
Meaning analysis further evaluates whether a report expresses a permanent objective, a context-dependent instrument, a particular judgment, or a response to exceptional circumstances. Rahman's distinction between isolated hadith formulations and the moral movement of the Sunnah, al-Ghazālī's emphasis on Qur'anic and historical coherence, and al-Qaraḍāwī's differentiation between stable purposes and changing means provide important foundations for this inquiry.⁴⁸ Contextual interpretation is thus constrained by evidence and normative reasoning rather than reduced to contemporary preference.

The model is circular because these dimensions continually test one another. A significant textual variant may require renewed examination of the sanad branch in which it appears. A distinctive cluster of wording associated with one group of transmitters may help reconstruct an earlier textual form. Historical context may demonstrate that apparently universal language addressed a specific political crisis, while recognition of a particular Prophetic capacity may limit the normative scope of an otherwise authentic report. Conversely, contextual or ethical discomfort cannot independently prove that a report is historically inauthentic. Contextualist interpretation becomes methodologically vulnerable when justice, equality, or reason is invoked without demonstrating how the proposed meaning emerges from textual and historical evidence.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*; Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth*; Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa Nata'āmal Ma'a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah: Ma'ālim Wa Dawābiṭ*.

⁴⁹ Alina Isac Alak, "The Islamic Humanist Hermeneutics: Definition, Characteristics, and Relevance," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34, no. 4 (2023): 313–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2023.2282842>.

Figure 1. Integrated Circular Model of Hadith Criticism



Note: The model is recursive rather than linear. Authenticity does not automatically establish universality, and contextual relevance cannot replace historical verification.

The solid two-directional arrows indicate reciprocal testing among sanad, matn, and meaning. The dashed central circle represents recursive evaluation, through which findings at one level may reopen judgments at another. The three analytical outputs must remain distinct: historical attribution asks how securely the report can be traced; textual–interpretive plausibility identifies the wording and reading best supported by the evidence; normative applicability determines whether the report is universal, contextual, advisory, political, or otherwise limited.

The circular structure should not be understood as unrestricted interpretive movement. To avoid arbitrary reasoning, each revision must be documented through an explicit evidentiary trigger, such as a variant, chronological inconsistency, contextual mismatch, contradictory report, change in genre, or conflict between literal application and demonstrable Prophetic purpose. The interpreter must also record alternative explanations and explain why one reconstruction is preferred. Circularity therefore refers to controlled methodological feedback, not to circular reasoning in which an assumed conclusion is used to validate its own premises.

The model also offers a future-oriented framework for digital hadith studies. Digitized corpora can facilitate large-scale mapping of textual reuse, variant clusters, commentator networks, and transmission patterns. Recent work using curated Arabic corpora demonstrates how computational tools can identify extensive textual correspondences across hadith commentaries, although those correspondences still require philological and historical interpretation.⁵⁰ Digital evidence can therefore strengthen the sanad–matn relationship but cannot independently establish authenticity or normative authority.

The methodological contribution of the Integrated Circular Model lies in distinguishing without separating three judgments that are frequently conflated: historical attribution, textual–interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability. Authenticity does not automatically establish universality, while contextual relevance cannot replace historical verification. The principal analytical conclusion is therefore that a defensible hadith methodology must allow sanad, matn, and meaning to correct, constrain, and refine one another through a transparent and evidence-based recursive process.

Testing the Integrated Circular Model: The Abū Bakrah Hadith and Women’s Political Leadership

The fourth principal finding is that applying the Integrated Circular Model to the Abū Bakrah hadith produces a more differentiated judgment than either unrestricted literal acceptance or complete historical rejection. The report is commonly translated as stating that a people who entrust their affairs to a woman will not prosper. It is particularly significant because it has become one of the most frequently invoked Prophetic reports in legal and political arguments restricting women’s access to the highest offices of government. At the same time, modern Muslim scholars have disputed whether its wording constitutes a universal prohibition, a political prediction, or a context-specific assessment of the Sasanian succession crisis.⁵¹

At the sanad level, the model begins by acknowledging rather than bypassing the report’s canonical standing. Al-Bukhārī records it in two locations, including the chapters on the Prophet’s military expeditions and later tribulations. In the fuller version, Abū Bakrah recalls that the statement prevented him from joining the forces associated with ‘Ā’ishah during the Battle of the Camel. He then connects the Prophetic statement to news that the Persians had installed the daughter of Kisrā as ruler. The report therefore preserves two historical horizons: the original Persian succession event and Abū Bakrah’s recollection of it during the first Muslim civil war.⁵² These two horizons are integral to the transmitted matn and cannot be removed without altering the report’s documented narrative setting.

⁵⁰ Bednarkiewicz, Qurboniev, and Van Den Bossche, “Studying Hadith Commentaries in the Digital Age.”

⁵¹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Addison-Wesley, 1991); A Salaudeen and S A Dukawa, “A Critique of Abu Bakrah’s Hadith on Women Political Leadership,” *Al-‘Abqari: Journal of Islamic Social Sciences and Humanities* 24, no. 1 (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.33102/abqari.vol24no1.264>; E E Yakar, “Women’s Political Leadership: One Question and Two Divergent Fatwās,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 37, no. 2 (2022): 334–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2022.15>; Kadir Gürler, “Kadının Yöneticiliği Meselesi: Bir Hadisin Okunuşu ve Eleştirisi,” *Dini Araştırmalar* 4, no. 11 (2001): 67–94.

⁵² Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī: The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī: Arabic–English* (Darussalam, 1997).

The report's canonical inclusion provides strong evidence for its acceptance within Sunni hadith scholarship, but canonical status does not resolve every question about its function. Mernissi's critique drew attention to Abū Bakrah's position during the Battle of the Camel and asked whether the report's political use should be examined alongside the narrator's decision not to support 'Ā'ishah.⁵³ Haeri similarly observes that 'Ā'ishah's military and political leadership was historically real, whereas the hadith became especially important in later contestations of women's political authority.⁵⁴ The circular model does not treat a possible political use as sufficient evidence of fabrication. Instead, it distinguishes the question of whether Abū Bakrah transmitted the report from the separate question of how his later invocation of it shaped its political reception. This prevents both uncritical acceptance and the attribution of unverifiable motives to the narrator.

At the matn level, the analysis turns to the relationship between wording and occasion. The expression *lan yufliḥa qawmun wallaw amrahum imra'atan* possesses a grammatically general form, but the report itself identifies a specific referent: the Persians who installed Kisrā's daughter during a severe dynastic crisis. General language does not necessarily require unrestricted application when the report's narrative frame indicates a particular political event. Gürler's combined examination of the sanad, wording, Persian context, and later interpretation concludes that the hadith should not automatically function as a universal criterion excluding women from contemporary administration.⁵⁵ Salaudeen and Dukawa likewise argue that the report is more plausibly understood as context-specific than as an empirical prediction that every woman-led society must fail.⁵⁶

The matn must also be examined intertextually in relation to the Qur'anic narrative of the Queen of Sheba in Q. 27:23–44. The Qur'an does not condemn her because she exercises political authority. Instead, it portrays her as a ruler who consults her council, evaluates intelligence, anticipates the destructive consequences of war, and chooses diplomacy before confrontation. Her theological error concerns worship rather than her sex or possession of sovereignty. Stowasser observes that female sovereignty created interpretive difficulty for later exegetes, leading to expansions that shifted attention from the queen's political agency to imaginative accounts of her body, marriage, and submission.⁵⁷ Haeri further argues that the Qur'anic account presents a politically capable ruler whose negotiation protects her community, whereas later patriarchal reconstructions frequently diminish her authority.⁵⁸

The Qur'anic narrative should not be deployed simplistically to declare the hadith false. Its methodological function is to constrain the range of plausible interpretations. If the Qur'an represents a female sovereign as deliberative, intelligent, and capable of guiding her people away from destruction, then the Abū Bakrah report cannot easily sustain an ontological claim that women are inherently incapable of political judgment. The intertextual comparison therefore supports a narrower proposition: the hadith addresses the anticipated

⁵³ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*.

⁵⁴ Shahla Haeri, *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316389300>.

⁵⁵ Gürler, "Kadının Yöneticiliği Meselesi: Bir Hadisin Okunuşu ve Eleştirisi."

⁵⁶ Salaudeen and Dukawa, "A Critique of Abu Bakrah's Hadith on Women Political Leadership."

⁵⁷ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195111484.001.0001>.

⁵⁸ Haeri, *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender*.

fate of a particular political community rather than establishing that female biology necessarily causes governmental failure. This interpretation preserves both texts without forcing either an artificial contradiction or an unrestricted harmonization.⁵⁹

At the historical-contextual level, the phrase “the daughter of Kisrā” must be situated within the collapse of Sasanian political order after the fall and execution of Khosrow II. The empire experienced rapid dynastic turnover, internal conflict, elite factionalism, assassination, military exhaustion, and succession instability. Bōrān, a daughter of Khosrow II, ascended the throne around 630 CE after several rulers had risen and fallen within a short period. Her accession did not create the crisis; it occurred within a political system already severely destabilized. Historical records also associate her reign with attempts to restore order, issue coinage, reduce burdens, and pursue peace. It is consequently methodologically weak to isolate the ruler’s gender as the sufficient cause of Sasanian decline while disregarding the institutional collapse preceding her accession.

At the meaning level, the most plausible classification is therefore a Prophetic political assessment associated with a specific succession rather than an unrestricted rule of constitutional law. Al-Ghazālī argues that the statement concerns the Persian monarchy and should not be transformed into a universal judgment against women’s public competence.⁶⁰ Al-Qaraḍāwī’s distinction between permanent objectives and context-dependent instruments supports consideration of occasion, purpose, and the wider corpus before deriving a general ruling.⁶¹

This classification also helps explain why contemporary Islamic legal institutions have reached divergent judgments. Yakar’s comparison of Saudi and Turkish fatwas demonstrates that different legal methodologies and sociopolitical settings produce opposing rulings on women’s political leadership, even when both institutions engage the same scriptural heritage.⁶² Empirical studies further show that Muslim women have exercised political agency in Indonesia, Iran, and Islamic political parties despite persistent gendered constraints. These studies do not independently determine the hadith’s meaning, but they undermine a deterministic reading in which female leadership necessarily produces social failure.⁶³

The case ultimately demonstrates the analytical value of separating historical attribution, interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability. The hadith may retain its

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth*; Adis Duderija, “The Interpretational Implications of Progressive Muslims’ Qur’an and Sunna Manhaj in Relation to Their Formulation of a Normative Muslima Construct,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 19, no. 4 (2008): 411–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410802335457>; Haeri, *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender*.

⁶⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah Bayna Ahl Al-Fiqh Wa Ahl Al-Ḥadīth*.

⁶¹ Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa Nata’āmal Ma’a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah: Ma’ālim Wa Ḍawābiṭ*.

⁶² Yakar, “Women’s Political Leadership: One Question and Two Divergent Fatwās.”

⁶³ Valentine M Moghadam and Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, “Women and Political Leadership in an Authoritarian Context: A Case Study of the Sixth Parliament in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 1 (2016): 168–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000598>; Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, “The Emergence of Female Politicians in Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2017): 61–68, <https://doi.org/10.14203/jissh.v5i1.30>; Ella S Prihatini, “Islam, Parties, and Women’s Political Nomination in Indonesia,” *Politics & Gender* 16, no. 3 (2020): 637–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000321>; Mona Tajali, “Protesting Gender Discrimination from within: Women’s Political Representation on Behalf of Islamic Parties,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2017): 176–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1281570>.

canonical and historical significance while the inference that it permanently excludes every woman from political leadership remains methodologically unproven. The Integrated Circular Model does not subordinate the Prophetic tradition to contemporary preference. It requires every normative conclusion to be justified through transmission evidence, textual variation, Qur'anic intertextuality, historical circumstances, Prophetic capacity, and maqāsid-based evaluation. The principal conclusion is therefore that the report is best understood as a contextually grounded political judgment whose universalization into a gender-exclusive constitutional rule exceeds the evidence supplied by its sanad, matn, and historical meaning.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the methodological problem in contemporary hadith criticism cannot be resolved by privileging sanad, matn, or contextual interpretation as an independently sufficient source of judgment. In response to the first research objective, the analysis shows that classical Muslim criticism, Western historical-critical scholarship, and modern Muslim hermeneutics address different but interconnected dimensions of the hadith tradition. Classical criticism developed sophisticated procedures for examining transmission continuity, narrator reliability, textual anomaly, and concealed defects. Its concern with *shudhūdh*, *'illah*, conflicting reports, and variant transmission demonstrates that matn analysis was embedded within the classical system, even when it was articulated through the technical language of narrator error and transmission irregularity. The classical tradition should therefore not be reduced to mechanical sanad verification.

The study also finds that modern criticism has significantly expanded the methodological field without fully integrating its constituent approaches. Historical-critical scholarship exposed the limitations of treating complete transmission chains as self-validating evidence and directed attention to anachronism, common links, doctrinal development, and the historical formation of reports. Subsequent source-critical and *isnād-cum-matn* approaches refined this skepticism by demonstrating that transmission networks and textual variants must be examined together. Modern Muslim hermeneutics, meanwhile, shifted attention toward Qur'anic coherence, historical context, Prophetic purpose, ethical consequences, and the objectives of Islamic law. These developments have produced important methodological advances, but they frequently remain compartmentalized: historical criticism may reconstruct provenance without resolving normative meaning, while contextual interpretation may assess contemporary relevance without sufficiently re-examining transmission history.

To address this fragmentation, the study formulates the Integrated Circular Model of Sanad, Matn, and Meaning. Its principal theoretical contribution is the distinction and subsequent reintegration of three judgments that are often conflated: historical attribution, textual-interpretive plausibility, and normative applicability. Sanad functions as the historical anchor through which transmission routes, narrators, chronology, and textual families are reconstructed. Matn functions as the textual and epistemic test through which wording, variants, anomalies, coherence, and historical plausibility are evaluated. Meaning functions as the contextual-normative dimension through which the report's occasion, audience, genre, Prophetic capacity, objectives, and scope of application are determined. The model is circular because findings at one level may reopen conclusions reached at another. Circularity therefore signifies controlled methodological feedback rather than unrestricted interpretive flexibility.

Application of the model to the Abū Bakrah hadith concerning women's political leadership illustrates its analytical value. The report's canonical position and historical significance need not be denied. Nevertheless, canonical authentication does not by itself establish that the report constitutes a universal prohibition against female political authority. Comparison of its wording with its Persian succession context, its later invocation during the Battle of the Camel, the Qur'anic account of the Queen of Sheba, and the distinction between political assessment and universal legislation supports a more limited interpretation. The report is most plausibly understood as a contextually grounded judgment concerning a specific political crisis rather than an ontological assessment of women's governing capacity. The case confirms that a report may remain historically attributable while the universalization of one interpretation remains methodologically unsupported.

Academically, the Integrated Circular Model provides a framework for connecting hadith studies with Islamic law, hermeneutics, history, gender studies, religious ethics, and digital religion. Its broader significance lies in offering a disciplined response to contemporary forms of hadith circulation in which individual reports are frequently detached from transmission history, textual variants, interpretive traditions, and sociopolitical context. The model preserves the evidentiary rigor of classical scholarship while incorporating historical reconstruction and ethically responsible contextual reasoning. It thereby avoids both radical skepticism, which may dismiss the transmitted tradition prematurely, and ahistorical literalism, which may transform contextually situated reports into unrestricted norms.

The model remains provisional because it has been demonstrated through one contested report. Future research should test its analytical consistency across broader hadith genres, including legal, theological, medical, ethical, and eschatological traditions. Comparative applications should also examine whether different researchers can reach sufficiently transparent and reproducible judgments when working with the same transmission and textual evidence. Digital corpora may further support the mapping of transmission networks, variant clusters, textual reuse, and commentary traditions, although computational findings must remain subject to philological, historical, and hermeneutical evaluation. Such research will determine whether the Integrated Circular Model can develop into a more comprehensive methodology for relating inherited Islamic knowledge to the ethical, political, and intellectual challenges of changing Muslim societies.

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