



## The Critical Methodology of Contemporary Hadith Scholars in Evaluative Preference (Tarjih) Under Divergent Early Judgments: Sayyid Murtada al-Askari as an Applied Model

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**Abstract:** This study examines the critical method employed by contemporary hadith scholars when preferring among divergent judgments of early critics, taking Sayyid Murtada al-Askari as an applied model. The problem arises because narrator evaluations and critical judgments do not always form a single, uniform verdict. Different transmissions may attribute conflicting statements to the same critic; critics may disagree over a transmitter; or a judgment restricted to a particular teacher, region, period, or set of reports may later be generalized. Critics may also agree about a transmitter yet disagree about a specific report because of connection, interruption, elevation, suspension, name confusion, or textual composition. Contemporary preference therefore cannot be reduced to counting judgments or automatically choosing the harsher one.

Using inductive, analytical, comparative, critical, and historical methods, the study classifies the causes of early disagreement and identifies shared criteria in Sunni and Imami scholarship: authenticating the attribution of a critical statement, defining its exact object, reconciling apparently conflicting judgments where possible, studying each critic's terminology and relative strictness, preferring explained criticism or the judgment of the scholar most familiar with the transmitter's reports, weighing report-specific evidence, and separating the status of a narrator from that of an individual transmission.

These criteria are compared with al-Askari's method in *Abd Allah ibn Saba and Other Legends*, *One Hundred and Fifty Fabricated Companions*, *The Hadiths of the Mother of the Believers Aisha*, and *The Features of the Two Schools*. The analysis shows that al-Askari expanded preference beyond formal narrator criticism to include source criticism, historical verification, and textual analysis. He reconstructs a report family, locates its earliest recoverable source, compares it with independent transmission lines, examines genealogy, geography, and chronology, traces semantic development, and considers tribal or political motives.

Applied cases include Sayf ibn Umar's reports, the Ibn Saba narrative, fabricated Companions, and variant reports concerning the number of Imams. The study also identifies limitations: some evaluative steps remain implicit, opposing evidence is not always exhausted, and criticism of a report cluster can occasionally become a broader generalization. A ten-stage model is therefore proposed, beginning with verifying critical statements and defining the disagreement, then moving through reconciliation, narrator and source analysis, report-family reconstruction, textual and historical testing, cumulative weighing, and a proportionate final judgment that states its degree of certainty.

**Keywords:** Sayyid Murtada al-Askari; Hadith Criticism; Early Critics; Jarḥ wa-Ta'dīl; Critical Preference (Tarjih); Textual Criticism; Historical Criticism; Contemporary Hadith Scholarship.



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## Introduction

The science of hadith criticism emerged from practical application long before it was codified into formal theoretical rules [1]. Early critics evaluated narrators by cross-referencing their retention, identifying the closest students of particular scholars, distinguishing localized transmission from reports acquired during travel, comparing manuscript copies, and detecting subtle interruptions or errors [2], [3]. Consequently, their critical verdicts were often concise—expressions such as 'trustworthy' (thiqah), 'there is no harm in him' (la ba'sa bihi), 'weak' (da'if), 'denied in hadith' (munkar al-hadith), or 'he is nothing' (laysa bi-shay') [4]. However, these succinct terms were the distilled fruit of extensive knowledge regarding chains of transmission, narrators, and hidden defects ('ilal) [5]. They cannot be properly understood if isolated from the critic's specific terminology or the context of the inquiry to which they served as an answer [6].

It is inherent to critical ijtihad that its results vary. A critic's evaluation might shift after gaining access to new material; disciples might transmit answers given at different times; or a critic might describe a narrator as precise when transmitting from a specific teacher yet prone to error when transmitting from another [7]. Furthermore, critical perspectives differ: one scholar may assess moral integrity ('adalah), another retention and precision (dabt), and a third a specific, isolated report [8]. When later scholars compile these statements without critical refinement, they appear contradictory, whereas most are readily reconcilable [9].

In the modern era, this issue has expanded due to the ease of searching digital databases and biographical dictionaries [10]. A researcher can compile a list of critical remarks within minutes, yet risk equating an authenticated verdict with a paraphrased report, an explained criticism (jarḥ mufassar) with an unelaborated judgment (hukm mujmal), or the assessment of a scholar intimate with a narrator's corpus with that of an observer viewing him from afar [11], [12]. Consequently, critical preference (tarjih) risks degenerating into numerical voting or sectarian selection. The technology that facilitates text retrieval does not waive the obligation to comprehend texts deeply; indeed, it heightens the duty to uncover hidden print variations, scribal corruptions, and the uncritical duplication of single sources across multiple titles.

Sayyid Murtada al-Askari is distinguished by shifting the question of preference from 'What did the critics say about the narrator?' to a broader inquiry: How did the report originate? Through what path did it enter the primary sources? Did its transmitters multiply independently, or do they trace back to a single root? Do genealogy, geography, and established history corroborate it? How did its terminology or proper names evolve over centuries? In this approach, early critical judgments

become one component within an expanded critical file. Recent contemporary scholarship confirms that his method incorporates external criticism of chains and sources alongside internal criticism of texts, contexts, and historical environments.

## Literature Review and Academic Positioning

Recent academic scholarship has addressed both the theoretical principles of conflicting biographical evaluation (*jarḥ wa-ta'dīl*) and the applied critical method of Sayyid Murtaḍā al-ʿAskarī:

1. **Foundational Preference Criteria in *Jarḥ wa-Ta'dīl*:** Azizi and Motiee [13] investigated the foundational criteria for preferring biographical judgments in conflicting *jarḥ wa-ta'dīl*. They identified key factors such as the critic's personality, the phrasing of the judgment, the path of acquisition, preferring impugment or accreditation, and detailed reconciliation. Their core conclusion emphasized that "additional knowledge" (*ziyādat al-ʿilm*) serves as the overarching principle, meaning no single criterion operates as a rigid mechanical rule in all contexts [13]. Similarly, classical and contemporary manuals of hadith terminology (*muṣṭalaḥ*) by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ [3], Ibn Ḥajar [5], al-Sakhāwī [9], and al-ʿItr [11] emphasize that explained criticism takes precedence over general accreditation only when the flaw is validated and untainted by critical misapprehension.
2. **Al-ʿAskarī's Methodology in Historical and Textual Criticism:** Kesraei et al. [14] analyzed al-ʿAskarī's methodology in historical criticism, concluding that he combined external criticism (evaluating historian reliability, narrator trustworthiness, and book attribution) with internal criticism (textual stabilization, report-family construction, semantic development, and sectarian bias). Iqbalian and Maʿaref [15] examined his hadith criticism foundations in historical and biographical reports, categorizing his premises into theological, historical, Islamic-scientific, and linguistic domains. Maʿaref and Iqbalian [16] further analyzed the causes and effects of narrative distortion in history and biography according to al-ʿAskarī, demonstrating how scribal errors and political motives corrupted primary sources. In a comparative study, Rad and Mardani [17] analyzed al-ʿAskarī's hadith methodology in *Maʿālim al-Madrasatayn*, evaluating his critique of both Sunni and Shiʿi source heritages.
3. **Methodological Shortcomings and Limitations:** To avoid uncritical praise, Imani et al. [18] presented a critical evaluation of textual hadith criticism in al-ʿAskarī's works. They identified three primary limitations: insufficient engagement with certain traditions deemed authentic in alternative scholarly traditions, incomplete engagement with counter-arguments in specific instances, and implicit rather than explicit demonstration of analytical steps in certain applications [18].

Despite these valuable contributions, existing literature treats the theoretical rules of conflicting *jarḥ wa-ta'dīl* in abstract isolation or analyzes al-ʿAskarī's historical critique without bridging the two domains. This study fills that gap by connecting critical preference theory with al-ʿAskarī's historical project, producing a comprehensive, structured model that unifies biographical, external, and internal criticism.

## Methodology

This study employs an integrative qualitative methodology combining inductive, analytical, comparative, historical, and evaluative techniques to examine critical preference in contemporary hadith scholarship:

[Primary Data Collection] —> [Inductive & Content Analysis] —> [Comparative Triangulation]  
—> [Model Formulation]

(Primary Texts & Monographs) (Causes & Criteria Extraction) (Sunni, Imami, & al-‘Askarī)  
(10-Stage Framework)

1. **Inductive Selection and Content Analysis:** The primary texts of Sayyid Murtaḍā al-‘Askarī—including ‘*Abd Allāh ibn Sabā’ wa-Asāṭīr Ukhrā* [19], *Khamsūn wa-Mi’ah Ṣaḥābī Mukhtalaq* [20], *Aḥādīth Umm al-Mu’minīn ‘Ā’ishah* [21], and *Ma’ālim al-Madrasatayn* [22]—were inductively surveyed to extract his explicit and implicit evaluative procedures. Early biographical dictionaries (*rijāl*) and classical hadith terminology manuals from both Sunni [2]–[5], [8] and Imami [23]–[27] traditions were analyzed to map classical preference criteria.
2. **Comparative Method:** The study systematically compares the evaluative rules applied in Sunni biographical scholarship [4], [5], [12] with those of Imami biographical scholarship [23], [24], [26], identifying shared methodological principles (such as authenticating attribution, prioritizing explained criticism, and seeking additional knowledge) while noting school-specific premises.
3. **Historical-Critical Analysis:** Selected applied cases—specifically the reports of Sayf ibn ‘Umar, the Abd Allāh ibn Sabā’ narrative, fabricated Companions, and variant traditions regarding the number of Imams in *al-Kāfī* [28]—were subjected to historical and textual analysis. Transmission paths, manuscript variations, tribal genealogies, and historical timelines were cross-referenced against independent historical records.
4. **Procedural Model Formulation:** Synthesizing the theoretical principles of *jarḥ wa-ta’dīl* with al-‘Askarī’s applied innovations, the study constructs a procedural ten-stage model designed to guide contemporary evaluative preference (*tarjīḥ*) in academic research and digital hadith processing.

## Result and Discussion

### Causes of Disagreement Among Early Critics

The investigation reveals that critical disagreement among early hadith scholars is predominantly apparent rather than real [13]. The primary causes of divergent judgments are classified into seven distinct categories, as summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Classification of Causes of Early Critical Disagreement.

| Cause Category                                         | Primary Mechanism                                                                     | Methodological Impact                                                        | Reconciliation/Preference Rule                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Information Access &amp; Proximity</b>              | Varying direct contact with narrators, regional circles, or original manuscripts [2]. | One critic detects subtle errors; another observes only sound transmissions. | Prioritize the critic most familiar with the narrator’s specific corpus [2]. |
| <b>Narrator Alteration &amp; Critic <i>Ijtihād</i></b> | Cognitive decline ( <i>ikhṭilāl</i> ), loss of books, or evolving critic              | Transmissions before decline are sound; late oral dictates are weak.         | Distinguish pre-decline from post-decline transmissions [3].                 |

| Cause Category                       | Primary Mechanism                                                                                                   | Methodological Impact                                                                                      | Reconciliation/Preference Rule                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Terminology &amp; Strictness</b>  | evaluations [3], [7].<br><br>Distinct expressive habits (e.g., Ibn Maʿīn's use of <i>lā baʿsa bihi</i> ) [4], [10]. | Terms carry different weight depending on the critic's temperament.                                        | Analyze the critic's overall usage inductively rather than using fixed ratings [10].    |
| <b>Object of Judgment</b>            | Evaluating moral integrity ( <i>ʿadālah</i> ) vs. memory ( <i>ḍabṭ</i> ) or a single report [8].                    | A narrator may be morally upright yet prone to specific memory errors.                                     | Define the exact target: moral integrity, general retention, or an isolated report [8]. |
| <b>Textual &amp; Name Confusions</b> | Scribal corruptions ( <i>taṣḥīf</i> ) and name similarities creating ghost personae [20].                           | Variant spellings create artificial duplicate entries in biographical works.                               | Cross-reference original manuscripts, genealogies, and regional dictionaries [20].      |
| <b>Theological Frameworks</b>        | Differences regarding sectarian innovation, companionship, or consensus narrators [22].                             | Accusations of "extremism" ( <i>ghuluww</i> ) may reflect theological disagreement rather than dishonesty. | Separate personal doctrine from technical veracity and reporting honesty [22].          |
| <b>Report Evaluation Standards</b>   | Surface chain acceptance vs. deep detection of hidden defects ( <i>ʿilal</i> ) [5], [11].                           | A pristine surface chain may conceal hidden interruption ( <i>irsāl khafī</i> ).                           | Prefer the judgment of hidden-defect specialists ( <i>ahl al-ʿilal</i> ) [5].           |

### Structure and Findings of al-ʿAskarī's Methodological Framework

Analysis of al-ʿAskarī's applied corpus [19]–[22] demonstrates that he transformed traditional preference from a narrow, chain-focused evaluation into an integrative framework encompassing external and internal criticism. The core components of his method include:

**Source Deconstruction and Primacy of the Root Origin:** Al-ʿAskarī established that the proliferation of citations across late historical works (e.g., Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn Ḥajar) does not constitute independent corroboration when all citations trace back to a single early compiler (such as al-Ṭabarī) transmitting from a single suspect narrator (such as Sayf ibn ʿUmar) [19], [20].

1. **Reconstruction of Report Families:** By gathering all transmission paths and textual variants into a single analytical file, al-ʿAskarī isolated late textual insertions, identified



common sources, and demonstrated how single fabricated stories evolved into widespread historical narratives [21], [22].

2. **Integration of Auxiliary Historical Sciences:** He systematically incorporated pre-existing genealogical literature, historical geography, and chronological timelines to test the plausibility of reported military commanders, battles, and poetry [20].
3. **Internal Textual Criticism Within Confessional Heritages:** Demonstrating methodological consistency, al-‘Askarī applied textual and manuscript criticism to variants in *al-Kāfī* [28], establishing that certain readings suggesting thirteen Imams were scribal corruptions of "Ali and eleven of his descendants" rather than authentic theological doctrines [22].

### Proposed Ten-Stage Model for Evaluative Preference (*Tarjīh*)

To address the limitations identified in contemporary scholarship [18]—such as implicit analytical steps and potential over-generalization—this study synthesizes classical rules of *jarḥ wa-ta’dīl* [3], [5], [13] with al-‘Askarī’s applied methods [14], [19] into a structured ten-stage model:

1. **Stage 1: Target Unit Definition:** Explicitly define the exact target of inquiry (narrator, transmission path, manuscript, textual phrase, or historical event) to prevent unevidenced sweeping generalizations.
2. **Stage 2: Critical Statement Authentication:** Trace all biographical remarks directly to primary sources, verifying transmitting students and eliminating secondary unverified summaries [4].
3. **Stage 3: Conflict and Reconciliation Testing:** Determine whether critical verdicts share the exact same target and context. Apply legitimate reconciliation (e.g., pre- vs. post-decline, specific teacher) before declaring genuine conflict [3], [8].
4. **Stage 4: Critic Basis and Additional Knowledge (*Ziyādat al-‘Ilm*):** Weigh critic standing, specialization, and access. Grant preference to the critic demonstrating superior explanatory knowledge (*ziyādat al-‘ilm*) [13].
5. **Stage 5: Path and Source Book Critique:** Test chain continuity, hidden defects (*tadlīs*), and manuscript integrity. Separate text authenticity to an early compiler from the historical truth of the event reported [5], [11].
6. **Stage 6: Report-Family Reconstruction:** Map all transmission lines into a family tree, removing false corroborations derived from a shared root source [21].
7. **Stage 7: Textual and Historical Verification:** Evaluate the text against the Quran, established Sunnah, verified history, geography, and genealogy [14], [15].
8. **Stage 8: Narrative Motive Analysis:** Examine recurring political, tribal, or sectarian utility as an explanatory secondary factor, ensuring motive analysis does not replace structural textual evidence [16].
9. **Stage 9: Cumulative Multi-Factor Balancing:** Aggregate evidence across biographical verdicts, chain mechanics, source integrity, and historical consistency. Test counter-hypotheses rigorously [18].
10. **Stage 10: Proportionate Final Verdict:** Formulate a nuanced, two-tiered final judgment (rating the narrator separately from the specific report) and state the exact degree of certainty (definitive, highly probable, plausible, or suspended) [13].

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that divergent judgments among early hadith critics represent the natural outcome of variations in information access, critical perspectives, precise targets, and terminology. Methodological failure occurs when later researchers read verdicts outside their original contexts or reduce dynamic preference principles into rigid mechanical headcounts. Explained criticism, critic standing, and source antiquity are conditional indicators governed by the overarching principle of additional knowledge (*ziyādat al-‘ilm*).

Sayyid Murtaḍā al-‘Askarī’s method expands critical preference in historical reports beyond formal narrator evaluation to encompass source criticism, report-family reconstruction, manuscript comparison, genealogy, geography, chronology, semantic development, and narrative motive. His strongest applications occur where multiple lines of evidence converge cumulatively: severe narrator weakness, complete isolation, downstream duplication of a single source, absence of personae from independent reference works, and chronological impossibilities. The proposed ten-stage model provides contemporary scholars with a transparent, reproducible framework that synthesizes early biographical rigor with modern textual and historical analytical tools.

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