?How to Better Understand and Study Hadith

Narrations (*ahadith*) make up one of the most important sources of Islamic knowledge and are subsequently greatly utilized in various different Islamic sciences. In order to best make use of narrations, it is imperative to have a good and correct understanding of them before making or basing conclusions based off of them.

A correct and deep understanding of narrations will not only deepen one's understanding of Islam, but also perhaps broaden one's perspective on many other topics. We will be looking at some of the main factors that play an important role in understanding ahadith correctly and deeply, while also pointing out a few issues that can act as barriers to attaining a better understanding. This post is essentially a summary of a recent book I read, titled Darsnameh-ye Fahm-e Hadith.

The jurisprudence of hadith is a science that deals with the analysis of the content (matn) of a narration, for the purpose of correctly understanding the meaning – that which a narrator intended to get across. This science is inclusive of other sub-fields such as the study of Ilm ul-Rijal, chain of narrations, and the content. It also relies on other information one has at their disposal, such as history and familiarity with books and their authors.

Why Attempt to Understand the Hadith Better?

:Imam Sadiq (as) has been reported to have said

حديثٌ تَدْريهِ خيرٌ من ألفٍ تَرْويهِ

Understanding one narration, is better than narrating a thousand. [1]

Many times misunderstanding a narration is worse than not understanding, or even not reading a narration at all. A true and deep understanding of narration can have an effect on a person's belief as the most understanding of the believers are those who understand the meaning of narrations – and this is natural. There are a few narrations by the Imams that signify this, such :as this report attributed to Imam Sadiq (as) in Ma'ani al-Akhbar of Sheikh Saduq

يا بُنَيَّ، اِعْرِف منازلَ الشِّيعَه على قَدرِ روايتِهِم و معرفتِهِم، فإنّ المعرفه هِيَ الدِّرايَه لِلرِّوايَه و بالدّراياتِ لِلرِّواياتِ يَعلُو المؤمنُ إلى أقصى درجاتِ الإيمان. إنّي نظرتُ في كتابٍ لعليٍّ عليه السلام فَوَجدتُ في الكتابِ أَنّ قيمه كلِّ امرِئٍ و قدرَه معرفتُه. إنّ اللّهَ ـ تبارَک وَ تَعالى ـ يُحاسِبُ النَّاسَ على قَدْرِ ما آتاهُم

مِنَ العُقُولِ في دارِ الدُّنيا

O my son, recognize the ranks of Shi`a according to the amount of their narrations and their understanding thereof. Indeed this understanding is his cognizance of the narration and through cognizance of the narrations the believer rises to the highest level of faith. Indeed I glanced upon the Book of Ali (as) and I found therein: Indeed every man's worth and importance is his ma'rifah (understanding). Allah, the Blessed and High, judges man according to the level of intellect accorded to him in this world. [2]

Understanding the Strength of a Narration

One of the most fundamental thing to do when intending to study narrations is to evaluate its strength. Scholars have used different methodologies to strengthen and weaken the authenticity of narrations and it is important to become familiar with them and trying to get a better understanding of these methods. It is clear from the works of Ibn Taoos and Allamah Hilli, that the meaning of an "authentic" narration differed between the earlier scholars (qudama) and the later ones.

Various different approaches have been taken to weaken traditions throughout history. For example Allamah Majlisi weakens Misbah al-Shari'ah by saying that the words of it are not in accordance to what can be found in other words of the Imams.[3] Meaning, the wordings does not seem fitting of what can be seen in the general overall hadith literature. So we see that one of the ways that books or narrations were and are weakened, is through analyzing the content itself. Yusuf Bahrani says something similar – despite being an Akhbari – as he rejects a narration that suggests that iron is impure (najis). Sunni hadith scholars have also written similar works and utilized similar methods to weaken narrations.

Likewise, different approaches have also been used to strengthen traditions. Sheikh Tusi is one well known example of a scholar who would strengthen narrations even if the chain of narrators was weak, simply by looking at the content.[4] Ahmed bin Abi Talib Tabrasi does not bring any chain of narrations in his al-Ihtijaj, because he says that the scholars have had a consensus on these and that they are not against rationality. Muhaqqiq Hilli in his al-Mu'tabar[5] also suggests the same and many scholars of akhlaq take this approach as well. Mulla Sadra does the same in his exegeses of al-Kafi by mentioning that while a chain of a certain narration is weak, there is no issue with its content. However, it should be understood that when a narration is strengthened through this method, it does not necessarily mean it helps you arrive at certainty.

says in a marginal wrote written on Sharh of al-Kafi of (ابوالحسـن شعرانـي) Abul Hasan Shi'rani

that is: a – إنّ الضعفَ بحَسَبِ الأسنادِ لاينافي صِحَّه المَضامينِ :Mulla Saleh Mazandarani that narration deemed weak based on its chain of narrators, does not discredit the authenticity of the subjects (i.e. content).

General Overview of Understanding Narrations

Many narrations can't be understood after reading them once or by hearing them once, even if the content is very short. The stages to understanding narrations are not easy, but they can be limited down to two fundamental stages: 1) Understanding the content, and 2) Understanding the purpose of the narration.

In the first stage, one must try to understand and analyze the words that have been utilized in a narration. We must identify the position and relationship of each word with each other in the content. Only after this can one arrive at a basic understanding of the content. In Usul al-Fiqh this is referred to as dhuhur al-awwali or murad al-isti'mali.

In the second stage, one must identify that the content of the narration is really what the narrator intended to get across, and that it was not a joke, sarcasm, or something in which the true message is being concealed. For example a statement such as "the door is open", could mean that one is giving a suggestion to someone to close the door, or suggesting someone to come inside. To determine this, we are in need of knowing a lot more than just the content, and rather need to know about context, history, social norms etc.

Therefore, being able to understand narrations is not always an easy task and requires a lot of effort. Before being able to embark on this task, two further questions need to be answered: 1) Is the content in our hands truly a narration, and 2) Is the content of the narration this very content that we possess.

The first gives us satisfaction that it is a narration to begin with, while the second prevents us from trying to fix the narration from any possible alterations that could have influenced it. After this, we can attribute its content to being what is defined as a hadith.

The answer to the very first question is reliant on Ilm ul-Rijal and history, and by history we mean, to know what the earliest sources have said. The second question also helps us bring satisfaction in the sense that what we have is truly a correct narration with the intended meaning of the narrator not changed. For example, in this statement from a narration from al-Kafi[6]:

ويل للذين يجتنبون الدنيا بالدين

We notice that in other manuscripts, instead of the verb (يجتنبـون) or (يختلـون) has (يجتلبـون) been used. Trying to confirm which verb is the most relevant and correct one in this narration is

what answers our second question.

Required Tools

Morphology & Vocabulary

After confirming that a hadith is truly a hadith, we need to start looking and understanding the apparent meaning of the content. For this, one needs to be familiar with Sarf (morphology), Fiqh ul-Lughat, and Ghareeb ul-Hadith.

Since diacritical marks were not generally put in the Arabic text, one can encounter issues when trying to understand which word is being used. For example, Imam Sadiq (as) has reported to have said[7]:

إِنَّ قَوْماً مِنَ النّاسِ قَلَّتْ مُداراتُهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ فَأُنفُوا مِنْ قُرَيشٍ

The verb أنفــوا can have multiple possible readings, either on the paradigm from Baab of If'aal, or as a passive verb tense of a thulathi mujarrad – both of which will give different meanings.[8]

Being equipped with the knowledge of Sarf, can also help us see the beauty and depth of some of the words that were used in narrations, particularly those that point towards emphasis.

In regards to identifying words, there are two approaches to take: 1) Taqleedi, and 2) Ijtihadi. Ijtihadi is used less since it is lengthy and time consuming. In terms of taqleed (imitating), the best method is to refer to books of vocabulary. Although it is important to discover the meaning of a word that was implied when it was used during the time a narration was narrated. In terms of the ijtihadi route, it is important that a person is an expert linguistic.

As for Ghareeb ul-Hadith, it refers to words that are used in a narration that are not common and their meanings are hard to decipher. One of the best books in this subject is al-Nihaya of Ibn Athir. Many times one may also need to look into poetry to see how certain words were being used and with what meaning. Books on Furuq al-Lughat are also important to refer to when synonyms are used.

At times, a meaning of a word can really be illustrated by looking at its opposite. A good example of this is the hadith that lists out the soldiers of intelligence and ignorance[9] where the characteristics are all opposites of each other.

Syntax & Eloquence

Being able to identify the syntax of a sentence is imperative. Since majority of the times a narration was said in formal Arabic, Arabic Syntax (Nahw) teaches us the rules of Fusha Arabic. Being familiar with the style of speech is another factor that can help you understand a narration. One easy way to determine what and how to read a narration is to see if anything

similar has been said in another similar narration that was easier to understand. On the contrary, one of the more difficult things to do is to identify the meaning of compound words – something that dictionaries do not often provide. Metaphors are also heavily used in narrations, and they accompany meanings that are not always understood on a first glance. For example, the Prophet (pbuh) once told Imam Ali to stand up and cut his tongue") – one must not understand this as a physical cutting, rather the Prophet (pbuh) was asking the Imam to silence a poet. قُمْ فَاقْطَعْ لِسانَهُ ("[10]

Collecting and Analyzing the Context

Knowing the context of a narration is extremely important and most of the times it can change the implication of the meaning completely. Take into consideration whether important words being used in a narration are corresponding completely with the meaning of the word (dalalat mutabiqi) or implying part of its meaning (dalalat tadhammuni) or implying necessitation (dalalat iltizami) of another subject besides the word itself.

We can divide the topic of context into two parts. If a context is mentioned in the narration itself, it is called a Muttasil (connected) context. If it is not mentioned in the narration then it is referred to as Munfasil (disconnected). If the Muttasil is in words themselves, it is called Lafzi (textual), otherwise it is called Maqami.

A context that is Muttasil is mostly Lafzi and it is either a word or a sentence in a narration that helps us understand the context. A Muttasil can further be divided into 3: Tadhmeen, Ta'leel and Question of a Narrator.

Tadhmeen: is when words of one person are mixed up with the words of another to better illustrate the context. Tadhmeen itself can be divided into ayat, hadith, idioms and poetry.

Ayat: When Imam Sajjad (as) says[11]: يا سَوْأتاهُ لِمَنْ غَلَبَتْ اِحْداتُهُآحادُهُ عَشَراتِه – one can recall the verse of Surah al-An'am 160

Hadith: In terms of ahadith, the Imams would often use the words of the Prophet or the previous Imam to help one understand a narration

Idioms & Metaphors: Idioms are used at times to help explain the content of a narration. Refer to Sermon 35 of Nahj ul-Balagha to see how Imam Ali (a) brings a lot of metaphors and idioms such as: وَ ضَنَّ الزَّنْدُ بِقَدْحِهِ and لَوْ كانَ يطَاعُ لِقَصِيرٍ أَمْرٌ

Poetry: Poetic verses helps in understanding context as well and summarizes a lot of content and meaning in just a few words

Ta'leel: is when a narrator actually explains the reason for why something was said or done the way that it was or for the reader to understand the cause and effect or the relationship between the words that are being used.

Question of a Narrator: a lot of narrations are in fact responding to questions asked by individuals. This can even been proven by looking at the works of Masail of Ali bin Ja'far and other similar works compiled based off of question and answer sessions held with the Imams.

Understanding the Reason for why a Statement was Said

Just like we tend to get familiar with the context of the revelation of verses of the Qur'an, we should get familiar with the reasoning for why a hadith was recorded or narrated.

We must analyze history and see what was going on at the time for a narrator to ask such a question or for it to be recorded in the books. This could mean that we look into books of history, tafseer or any other relevant material, collectively. For example, trying to understand the sermon of Imam Husain (a) on his way to Karbala requires one to understand the external environment of the time. Another example is as follow:

قيلَ لِعَلِي عليه السلام: لَوْ غَيرْتَ شَيبَکَ يا أميرَالمُؤمِنينَ، فَقالَ: اَلْخِضابُ زينَه وَ نَحْنَ قَوْمٌ في مُصيبَه

Imam Ali (as) was asked to colour and dye his grey hair, but he replied saying that it would be a sign of adornment, whereas we are a nation that is under a calamity. Syed Radhi says that Imam Ali (as) didn't colour his beard because he was mourning for the Prophet[12], when in reality, this narration was said during the time when they were returning from the Battle of Siffeen and was decades after the demise of the Prophet (pbuh).

Forming a Family of Narrations

One of the contextual signs to look for in a narration is a context that is Munfasil - which are also mostly words. In the case of narrations, the best Munfasil context are narrations themselves that are similar in nature.

By looking at a family of narrations, we can get a lot of information about the subject. Tools and concepts that one learns in Usul al-Fiqh are also important to utilize in this process.

Many times a narration is repeated, but not with the same words – rather its meaning. Many narrators have simply narrated the meaning of a narration that they had originally heard; although they have therefore made mistakes as well. Many times numerous narrations have the same meaning, but not each of them can be considered reliable or unreliable. We have to reconcile them to see what wordings are the most reliable in order to get the most correct meaning, from all of them collectively.

This has always been a tradition of the Hadith scholars. When looking at most of our ahadith works, you will see that they have been categorized under different subjects that all give specific meanings. Hurr al-Amili is a great example of employing this method in his Wasael ul-Shi'a. The most important benefit of categorizing ahadith in a single family of subjects, is to

determine the rules, and the overall message that these narrations are trying to deliver. Doing so also helps up find the relationship of the meaning of words with what they are implying in a narration. Furthermore, it helps us determine whether a ruling is applicable to all, in all cases, or does it have any conditions. An example of a condition or limitation put on a rule which becomes conditioned by these two narrations[14] [15]: [is as follow[13]: اَلْعِتابُ حَياه الْمَوَدَّه
كَثْرَه الْعِتابِ تُؤذنُ بِالاِرْتيابِ and إياکَ أنْ تُكَرِّرَ الْعَتَبَ؛ فَإنَّ ذلِکَ يُغْرِي بِالذَّنْبِ وَ يُهَوِّنُ الْعَتَبَ

Trying to collect and form a family of narrations is not always fast or easy despite the technology that exists today. The first step is to look at the works of the older scholars to see how they treated narrations on any given subject. One must get a familiarity with the different subjects of narrations and all the narrations themselves before being able to embark on this task. Looking into treatises or books specific to certain subjects that have more research done into them with regards to the narrations is also important and beneficial. For example, the book Musadaqah al-Ikhwan of Sheikh Saduq which is about brotherhood, should be looked into if one wishes to read and understand more about such a topic.

Utilizing dictionaries is another task that is crucial. For example, if a topic of a narration is to do with truthfulness, we can look up a Qur'anic dictionary that explains what Sidq means and presents verses or other ahadith that explain the subject in more detail. This helps us see our ahadith in a much better light as well.

For example, a narration from Imam Ali[16]: [لا تَبـــاغَضُوا، فَإنَّهَـــا الْحـــالِقَه can only be correctly translated when other narrations from the same family of narrations regarding the word al-haliqah will be read and studied. A second example is from Imam Ali[17]: [قيمَه كُلِّ امْرِئٍ ما يُحْسِنُهُ which would also need to be understood in light of all related narrations.

Just like we refer to synonyms and even antonyms to become familiar with the full meaning of any given word, we should try to do the same with words being used in narrations. In this case, we need to look at narrations that have a relationship with each other and narrations discussing contrary opposite ideas.

Dealing with Contradictory Narrations

Knowing how to deal with contradictory narrations is very important and a skill itself. There were books written on topics where contradictory reports were reconciled with each other. Although one must be careful of considering something to be contradictory as opposed to something that was said differently due to a different context, a few things can alter a narration. Namely: misunderstanding, dissimulation, lack of context, transmission of meaning, fabrication, a ruling being revealed in stages, different level and understanding of the audience and narrators, content being specific to a certain subject or time in history, intentional or

unintentional alterations, and legal rulings pertaining to certain scenarios as opposed to being absolute.

When one finds a narration that appears to be contradictory, there are a few possible solutions to it. One can attribute the ruling or the subject matter of a narration to necessity, to dissimulation, or attribute a word to mean undesirability or desirability, attribute a command to mean abandoning or permitting something, or attribute a law to have become abrogated. Attributing something to being abrogated should be one of the last options one should resort to in order to reconcile a contradiction. Not a lot of jurists have resorted to this option either, and the examples are also extremely limited.

After developing a good understanding of a narration, it is important to also reconcile it with other sciences that we have at our disposal today. This could include science, medicine, economics, psychology, sociology etc. Knowledge of non-hadith literature is important to see how the essence of the words of the Imams apply today. However, these non-ahadith sciences can have two effects on understanding hadith: 1) creating more questions and discussions and 2) dispute and opposition – both of which need to be dealt with accordingly. Looking into the works of other scholars of hadith is also important – particularly older scholars, as they were living in an environment where the familiarity with the content was being experienced first-hand.

Barriers to Understanding Narrations

There are certain barriers that prevent us from understanding the content and other barriers are related to our second purpose of understanding narrations, which is to understand the purpose of why a narrator narrated a particular narration.

1) Tasheef and Tadheef: which can be divided into written and heard. These could possibly be a wide range of errors, such as incorrectly copying manuscripts or mishearing something. For example, a narration says: كانَ النَّبِيُّ صلي الله عليه و آله يَسْتَحِبُّ الْعَسَلَ يَوْمَ الْجُمُعَه – which makes it is desirable on Friday, when in reality it is referring to ghusl (الْعسل) seem that eating honey of Friday. (الْغسل)

whereas in another [Another narration from Imam Sadiq (as) says[18: اَلزّيارَه تثبتُ الْمَوَدَّه and it changes the whole meaning. – manuscript it was: اَلزّيارَه تُنْبِتُ الْمَوَدَّ

As for how a narration can be misheard, it is when you hear a word wrong, especially if their pronunciation is very close to each other. For example[19]: مَن استغنَي بِعقلِه ضلّ can have different meanings if someone says ضلّ instead of ذلّ or زلّ. The best way to identify these mistakes is by looking at different manuscripts and exegeses written by other scholars.

2) Synonyms: the best way to determine if a word has been misplaced, is by looking at the

could mean difference اِخْتِلافُ أُمَّتي رَحْمَه :context (muttasil or munfasil). For example, the hadith of opinions, or it could just meet meeting and greeting (the latter is what we understand from the narrations).

3) Confusing technical meanings with custom: only a certain `Urf (custom) can understand customary meanings and we should try to see what a certain word meant when it was heard by someone in the relevant society. A good example of this is the word Salat when reading narrations that mention this word.

4) Mixing the Farsi or Urdu meaning with Arabic: for someone who know Farsi, Urdu or both, should be aware that certain words may be the same, but don't necessarily have the same meaning or usage. For example a narration from Imam Ali (as) says[20]: اَلْمَـرْأه رَيحـانَه وَ لَيسَـتْ قَهْرَمـــــانَه – the word qahraman means a wrestler in Farsi, whereas in Arabic it has a totally different meaning of administrator.

5) Analyzing sentences incorrectly: if someone decides to just looks and understand one part of a narration, for example[21]: اِنَّمَا الشُّؤمُ فِي الثَّلاثَه: اَلْفَرَسُ وَ الْمَرْأه وَ الدّارُ. However determining what came before that sentence, which was إنْ كـانَ الطَّيـرَه فـي شَـيءٍ فَفـي... and after it, which was كانَ أهْلُ الْجاهِلِيه يقُولُونَ can resolve our issues. Both parts are taken from 2 different narrations. In other cases, one may simply misread a sentence in a narration and understand something completely opposite of what the narration is trying to say.

Other factors that can become a barrier are following one's hawa-un-nafs (egoistic desires) and bias. These become barriers and cause many issues in understanding a narration correctly. Many movements and sects were formed due to this very purpose. Not being able to recognize the tone of speech can also become a barrier. Being able to tell the tone to be a question, astonishment, rejection, or sarcasm is a skill that one needs to develop and takes time.

Ultimately when one decides to pursue hadith studies, they must try to understand the complete purpose of a narration by examining it in light of the family of narrations and also recognize the difficulties that are part and parcel of this process. This is to say, it is not sufficient to just read a narration or two on any given subject in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Notes

[1] Ma'ani al-Akhbar, Chapter 1, Hadith #3, Page 2

[2] Ibid

[3] Bihar al-Anwar, volume 1, Page 32

[4] Iddat al-Usul, volume 1, page 151 and 155

[5] Volume 1, page 29

[6] Usul al-Kafı, volume 2, Chapter on Ikhtilal al-Dunya bi al-Deen

[7] Usul al-Kafı, volume 3, Chapter on al-Mudarah

[8] Allamah Majlisi has discussed this in Mirat al-Uqool, Volume 8, page 230

[9] See Usul al-Kafı, volume 1, hadith #14 in the book of Aql wa Jahl

[10] Kitab al-Irshad, page 147

[11] Tuhaf al-Uqool, page 281

[12] Nahj al-Balagha, Saying 473

[13] Ghurar al-Hikam

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid

[16] Tuhaf al-Uqool, page 152

[17] Al-Amali of Sheikh Saduq, page 447

[18] Al-Ja`fariyyat, page 153

[19] Ghurar al-Hikam

[20] Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 31

[21] `Awali al-Liali, volume 1, page 136