Understanding Tadlīs: A Key Concept in the Science of Ḥadīth Criticism

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Understanding Tadlīs: A Key Concept in the Science of Ḥadīth Criticism

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Abstract

Tadlīs, a nuanced and critical concept within the discipline of ʿIlm al-Jarḥ wa al-Taʿdīl (the science of narrator criticism), refers to specific techniques of concealment or omission within the transmission of ḥadīth. This paper explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of tadlīs, tracing its definitions and classifications from early Islamic scholarship to later systematic elaborations. Classical scholars identified several forms of tadlīs, most notably *Tadlīs al-Isnād*—the concealment of a weak or missing link in the chain of narrators—and its close variant, *Tadlīs al-Shuyūkh*, which involves disguising the identity of a teacher. This study also clarifies the conceptual overlap and distinction between tadlīs and *irsāl khafī* (hidden discontinuity), a related phenomenon that further complicates isnād analysis. Using examples from major ḥadīth collections and biographical dictionaries, the article examines how early critics like al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn Ḥanbal, and Ibn al-Madīnī evaluated narrators who practiced tadlīs and what criteria they applied to determine the impact of tadlīs on ḥadīth authenticity. Emphasis is placed on understanding that not all tadlīs renders a ḥadīth weak, and a nuanced approach—considering corroborating evidence, the narrator's reliability, and contextual indicators—is essential. The study concludes that a rigid application of rules without regard for interpretive frameworks of early scholars risks oversimplification of a highly technical subject.

Keywords: Tadlīs, Irṣāl Khafī, Mudallis, Isnād, ʿIlm al-Jarḥ wa al-Taʿdīl

Introduction

The preservation and transmission of the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ sayings, actions, and tacit approvals—the ḥadīth—form an essential component of Islamic law, theology, and ethical guidance. The rigorous evaluation of these narrations is governed by the science of ḥadīth criticism, known as ʿIlm al-Jarḥ wa al-Taʿdīl, which critically assesses both the chain of transmission (*isnād*) and the content (*matn*). Among the sophisticated tools developed by early ḥadīth scholars is the identification of *tadlīs*, a subtle form of narrative concealment. This concealment may involve omitting a weak or disreputable narrator, using ambiguous terminology, or disguising the identity of a teacher—all of which have varying implications for the authenticity of a report.

Tadlīs is not always a sign of intentional deception; rather, it may stem from stylistic or cultural conventions of transmission. Nonetheless, the practice has serious consequences for the status of a ḥadīth, making it a central concern in isnād analysis. Early imams approached this phenomenon with intellectual depth, applying distinct methodologies to assess whether a ḥadīth affected by *tadlīs* should be accepted, rejected, or suspended. This study investigates the definitions, typologies, and hermeneutical strategies used by classical scholars to evaluate tadlīs within the broader framework of ḥadīth criticism.

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Literature Review:

1. Al-Mudallas: A Term in the Science of Hadith by Justice (R) Dr. Munir Ahmad Mughal

2. Ibn Hibban and the Narrations of the *Mudallisin* in His Book Al-Sahih: Rules, Motives, and Methodology by M.R. Ramle and S.H.M. Maidin

3. An Analytical Study on the Concept of Tadlees (Fraudulent Misrepresentation) in the Science of Hadith by Abdullahi Muhammad

Despite the valuable insights provided by these works, there is a discernible need for a more integrated analysis that bridges the perspectives of early Hadith scholars (Mutaqaddimin) with those of later scholars (Mutakhireen). The existing literature often treats definitions and classifications of *tadlis* in isolation, without adequately addressing the evolution of its understanding over time or the contextual factors influencing its application.

This research aims to fill this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of *tadlis*, encompassing its various forms, the methodologies employed by early critics to detect and assess it, and the implications for the authenticity of Hadiths. By synthesizing historical and contemporary perspectives, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding that reflects the complexity of *tadlis* within the science of Hadith criticism.

In doing so, this work aspires to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse by highlighting the importance of contextual analysis and the need for a balanced approach that respects the insights of early scholars while engaging with contemporary methodologies.

Research Questions:

1. How did the understanding and application of the term "*tadlis*" evolve between the early (*Mutaqaddimin*) and later (*Mutakhireen*) Hadith scholars, and what were the key factors driving these shifts in definition and methodology?

2. Beyond the commonly cited rule regarding explicit statements of hearing, what specific contextual clues and methodological principles did early Hadith critics (*Mutaqaddimin*) prioritize when evaluating the impact of potential *tadlis* on the authenticity and acceptability of Hadith narrations?

3. To what extent did the early Hadith scholars consider the narrator's intent (if ascertainable) in distinguishing between *tadlis* (intentional concealment) and *irsal khafī* (hidden discontinuity), and how does this compare to the emphasis placed on the narrator's intention by later scholars in defining these concepts?

Defining *Tadlis*: Evolving Perspectives

The definition of *tadlis* has been a subject of nuanced understanding and articulation among Hadith scholars across different eras. Two prominent perspectives emerge from the later scholars (*Mutakhireen*):

1. The Narrow Definition: This view, championed by scholars like Hafiz Abu al-Hasan al-Qattan, Imam Ibn Abd al-Barr,[1] and Hafiz Ibn Hajar,[2] defines *tadlis* as a narrator narrating something they did not directly hear from their sheikh, without explicitly mentioning the intermediary.[3] This definition primarily focuses on concealment within a chain where the narrator and the narrated-from individual did meet.

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[1] Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr. *At-Tamhīd limā fī al-Muwaṭṭaʾ min al-Maʿānī wal-Asānīd* (Beirut: Wizārat ʿUmūm al-Awqāf wa al-Shuʾūn al-Islāmīyah, 1993), 1:15.

[2] Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī. *Taʿrīf Ahl at-Taqdīs bi-Marātib al-Mawṣūfīn bi'ṭ-Tadlīs* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2000), 14.

[3] As-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn. *Tadrīb ar-Rāwī fī Sharḥ Taqrīb an-Nawawī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 1:256.

2. The Broader Definition: Adopted by Imam al-Nawawi,[4] Hafiz al-'Iraqi,[5] and Hafiz Ibn Kathir,[6] this definition encompasses two scenarios:

   * A contemporary who met their sheikh narrates something they did not hear directly, creating the impression of direct hearing.

   * A contemporary who did not meet the narrator transmits a Hadith, giving the impression of a meeting and direct hearing.

It is crucial to note that the first group considers only the first scenario as true *tadlis*, labeling the second as *irsal khafi* (hidden discontinuity). However, as we shall explore later, the application of the term by early scholars suggests a broader understanding closer to the second definition.

Tadlis al-Isnad: Concealment in the Chain

The first group of scholars specifically terms the form of *tadlis* they recognize as "*Tadlis* al-Isnad" (concealment in the chain of narration). This category encompasses several sub-types, each representing a specific method of obscuring a defect in the chain:

1. *Tadlis* al-Taswiyah (Equalization): Dropping a weak narrator from the middle of the chain after initially mentioning a reliable narrator, thereby making the chain appear stronger.

2. *Tadlis* al-Qat' (Severance): Narrating from a later narrator in the chain using wording that implies direct hearing from an earlier, more authoritative figure, effectively omitting the intermediate narrators.

3. *Tadlis* al-'Atf (Conjunction): Joining a narration heard from one sheikh with a narration not heard from another sheikh using a conjunctive particle (like "wa" - and), without clarifying the source of each part.

4. *Tadlis* al-Sukut (Silence): Mentioning a sheikh and then remaining silent before attributing the narration, creating ambiguity about the directness of the hearing.

5. *Tadlis* al-Ijazah (Permission): Using wording that implies direct narration ("Haddathana" - narrated to us) when the transmission was based on ijazah (permission to transmit), without clarifying this mode of reception.

6. *Tadlis* al-Siyagh (Wording): Employing ambiguous wording that could be interpreted as direct hearing when it was not the case.[7]

Beyond *Tadlis* al-Isnad: Other Forms of Concealment

Beyond the concealment within the chain of narration, scholars have identified other forms of *tadlis* that affect different aspects of the Hadith transmission:

1. *Tadlis* al-Shuyukh (Concealment of the Sheikhs): Mentioning a sheikh with a less common or ambiguous name, kunyah (patronymic), or laqab (nickname) to obscure their identity, often done to elevate the perceived status of the chain or to conceal weakness in the sheikh.

2. *Tadlis* al-Buldan (Concealment of the Places): Mentioning a less known or ambiguous place of origin for a narrator to conceal potential weaknesses associated with that location.

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[4] Al-Nawawī. *At-Taqrīb wa't-Taysīr li Maʿrifat Sunan al-Bashīr an-Nadhīr fī Uṣūl al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 39.

[5] Al-ʿIrāqī, Zayn al-Dīn. *At-Taqyīd wa'l-Īḍāḥ Sharḥ Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 95.

[6] Ibn Kathīr, Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar. *Ikhtiṣār ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2000), 53.

[7] Al-Ḥākim an-Naysābūrī. *Maʿrifat ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2002), 355.

3. *Tadlis* al-Mutaba'ah (Concealment in Corroboration): Introducing a weak or problematic chain of narration as corroborating evidence without clearly indicating its weaker status.

4. *Tadlis* al-Mutun (Concealment in the Texts): Making subtle alterations or omissions in the wording of the Hadith text itself.

5. *Tadlis* al-Irsal (Concealment of Discontinuity): This term is sometimes used interchangeably with *irsal* khafi, referring to narrating from a contemporary one did not meet or hear from, using wording that implies a connection.[8]

The Broader Application by Early Scholars (*Mutaqqidimin*)

Interestingly, the examination of the early Hadith scholars' application of the term "*tadlis*" reveals a broader understanding than the narrower definition proposed by some later scholars. They frequently applied the term to scenarios beyond just narrating without direct hearing from a met contemporary. This broader usage included:

1. Narrating from someone met and heard from, something not directly heard.
2. Narrating from a contemporary not met, or met but not heard from.
3. Narrating from a written record (sahifah) of a contemporary, regardless of meeting.
4. *Tadlis al-Shuyukh*.
5. Even narrations from non-contemporaries (as per Imam Ibn Hibban's view).[9]

This broader application underscores the early scholars' focus on any form of ambiguity or concealment that could potentially mislead about the authenticity or directness of the transmission.

The Ruling on Different Forms of *Tadlis*

A critical aspect of understanding *tadlis* lies in recognizing that the ruling on a narrator described as a *mudallis* (one who practices *tadlis*) varies depending on the specific type of *tadlis* committed. Therefore, applying the later scholars' rules uniformly to all instances of *tadlis* mentioned by early scholars can lead to inaccurate assessments.

For instance, in cases like *Tadlis al-Shuyukh* or narrating from a sahifah, the specific wording of transmission might not be the primary focus in determining discontinuity. Similarly, in the case of narrating from non-contemporaries (according to Ibn Hibban), the establishment of direct hearing is the key, not the wording.

The first scenario (narrating without direct hearing from a met contemporary) is where the later scholars' rule regarding the use of "'an" (from) as indicative of discontinuity for a *mudallis* is primarily applied. However, even this rule is not absolute.

Essential Principles and Reminders Regarding *Tadlis*

Several crucial principles and reminders emerge from the discussions of Hadith scholars regarding *tadlis*:

 * Early Imams' Broad Usage: The early imams often used "*tadlis*" to encompass what later scholars termed *irsal* khafi. In such cases, the discussion of explicit statements of hearing becomes irrelevant as no direct hearing occurred.

 * The Rule of Explicit Hearing is General, Not Absolute: The widely cited rule that a *mudallis's* narration is accepted only with an explicit statement of hearing is a general guideline and should not be applied rigidly to every instance of "'an" used by a *mudallis*. Contextual clues play a vital role.

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[8] al-Saʿad, Shaykh. *Tadlīs Ruwāt al-Ḥadīth wa Anwāʿuhu*. Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2001), 9–18.

[9] Abū Ḥātim Ibn Ḥibbān. Refer to: Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), 2:171; al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāẓ* (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1374 AH), 3:290–292; Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li'l-Malāyīn, 2002), 6:8.

* Contextual Clues are Paramount: Factors such as the *mudallis's* category (rare vs. frequent practitioner), the meticulousness of the narrators transmitting from the *mudallis*, the existence of corroborating narrations, the extent of the *mudallis's* narrations from a particular sheikh, and anomalies in the text or chain all serve as crucial contextual clues in determining the presence and impact of *tadlis*.

* Caution in Accepting Explicit Statements: Even when a *mudallis* explicitly states hearing, further scrutiny is required, especially when contextual clues suggest otherwise. The explicit statement itself needs authentication and verification.

* Respecting the Opinions of Early Critics: The opinions of established Hadith critics regarding the occurrence of *tadlis* in a specific Hadith should generally be followed, and contradicting them should be avoided, especially when multiple critics concur. In cases of disagreement, the researcher must exercise their own ijtihad (independent reasoning) while considering the available clues.

* Considering the Silence of Early Critics: If early imams authenticate a Hadith without raising concerns about *tadlis*, even if a *mudallis* is present in the chain, later scholars should generally respect this authentication, particularly concerning the narrations in the Sahihayn (al-Bukhari and Muslim).

* Specific Cases Like *Tadlis al-Taswiyah*: In forms like *Tadlis al-Taswiyah*, the explicit statement of hearing is required from the *mudallis* and all narrators in the seemingly connected part of the chain.

* Deceptive Wording: Be aware that even seemingly explicit wording of transmission ("Haddathana") can sometimes be used deceptively, as seen in the practice of Hasan al-Basri referring to the narrations of the people of his city or the custom of some narrators from Sham and Egypt to explicitly state hearing even when the chain was not directly connected (as in the case of Baqiyyah ibn al-Walid).[10]

A Multi-Stage Approach to Evaluating a *Mudallis's* Narration

When encountering a narrator described as practicing *tadlis*, a systematic approach is necessary:

1. Verification of the Accusation: First, confirm whether the accusation of *tadlis* against the narrator is actually substantiated.
2. Clarifying the Meaning of *Tadlis*: Determine what the early critics meant by "*tadlis*" in that specific instance – was it technical *tadlis* or *irsal* (discontinuity)?
3. Identifying the Type of *Tadlis*: Pinpoint the specific type of *tadlis* committed, as the ruling differs for each.
4. Considering Multiple Forms of *Tadlis*: Recognize that some narrators practiced multiple forms of *tadlis*, requiring careful assessment of which form is relevant in a particular narration.

Types of *Mudallisun* and Their Impact

Hadith scholars generally categorize *mudallisun* into two main types:

1. Frequent Practitioners of *Tadlis*: These are narrators for whom *tadlis* is a prevalent characteristic of their narrations. In their case, the default stance regarding their narrations using "'an" is suspension (tawaqquf) until a direct connection is established. This category often includes weak narrators or those criticized by some imams despite their general truthfulness. Examples include Baqiyyah ibn al-Walid and Hajjaj ibn Artat.

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[10] Abū Ḥātim Ibn Ḥibbān. Refer to: Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), 2:171; al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāẓ* (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1374 AH), 3:290–292; Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li'l-Malāyīn, 2002), 6:8.

2. Occasional Practitioners of *Tadlis*: This group comprises generally reliable huffaz (memorizers) who practiced *tadlis* infrequently or frequently but primarily narrated from sheikhs with whom they had extensive association and transmission. For such narrators, the default assumption for their narrations is connection, regardless of the wording used, unless *tadlis* is proven in a specific instance. Examples include Qatadah, al-A'mash, and Sufyan al-Thawri.[11]

Clues for Rejecting a *Mudallis's* "'An"

Even for *mudallisun* of the second type, certain clues can indicate the presence of *tadlis* in a specific narration using "'an":

* Oddity in the Narration: The presence of an unusual or anomalous element in the chain or text.

* Established Lack of Meeting or Hearing: Evidence proving that the narrator did not meet or hear from the mentioned sheikh.

* *Mudallis's* Own Admission: The *mudallis* explicitly stating they did not hear the Hadith directly or mentioning an intermediary when questioned.

* Mention of an Intermediary in Another Chain: Another reliable chain of the same Hadith narrated by the *mudallis* explicitly mentions an intermediary.

* Narration from a Weak Narrator: The Hadith is primarily known through a weak narrator and then appears through a *mudallis* known to narrate from that weak individual.

* Sole Narration from a Prominent Sheikh: The *mudallis* is the sole narrator from a highly reliable and prolific sheikh from whom many others narrated.

* Few Narrations from a Sheikh: The *mudallis* narrates extensively using "'an" from a sheikh from whom they are known to have heard very few Hadith.

* Contradiction with Reliable Narrators: The narration using "'an" contradicts the accounts of more reliable narrators.

* Unique Transmission of Core Beliefs or Practices: The Hadith concerning a fundamental aspect of belief or worship is transmitted solely through the *mudallis's* chain.

* Late Appearance of the Narration: The narration with "'an" is found only in later works and not in the primary collections of the "era of narration" (*ʿAṣr ar-Riwāyah*).[12]

* Explicit Criticism by Early Scholars: A critic explicitly states that the *mudallis* did not hear this particular Hadith from the sheikh or specifies the Hadith they did not hear.

Clues for Accepting a *Mudallis's* "An" (Provided No Other Defects Exist)

Conversely, several clues, derived from the practices of early imams, can support the acceptance of a *mudallis's* narration using "'an":

* Reliability and Authority of the *Mudallis*: The *mudallis* is a highly reliable and authoritative figure who generally narrates from other reliable narrators.

* Rare Practice or Extensive Association: The *mudallis* practices *tadlis* rarely or narrates extensively from sheikhs with whom they had a long and well-documented association.

* Meticulousness of the Transmitting Narrator: The narrator who transmits from the *mudallis* is known for their rigorous verification of direct hearing.

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[11] Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī. *Taʿrīf Ahl at-Taqdīs bi-Marātib al-Mawṣūfīn bi't-Tadlees* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyyah, 2000), 14.

[12] Abū Yāsir Muḥammad ibn Maṭar ibn ʿUthmān Āl Maṭar az-Zahrānī. *ʿIlm ar-Rijāl: Nashāʾatuhu wa Taṭawwuruhu min al-Qarn al-Awwal ilā Nihāyat al-Qarn at-Tāsiʿ*. Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2006, 46.

* Presence in the Sahihayn: The narration appears in the Sahihayn (al-Bukhari and Muslim), whose compilers were meticulous in their selection and often ensured the connection of chains involving *mudallisun* through other routes.

* Silence of Early Critics: Early critics authenticated the Hadith despite the *mudallis's* use of "'an" without raising concerns about *tadlis*.

* Corroborating Narrations: The *mudallis's* narration with "'an" is supported by a reliable, non-*mudallis* corroborating narration.

* Mention in Supporting Narrations: The narration is mentioned as supporting evidence (shahid) in other chains.

The Importance of Contextual Clues in Hadith Criticism

The reliance on contextual clues was a hallmark of the early Hadith critics' methodology. They understood that rigid application of general rules could lead to both unwarranted rejection and acceptance of narrations. The default acceptance of a reliable narrator's Hadith and the default rejection of a weak narrator's Hadith are prevalent tendencies, not absolute laws. Insightful critics recognized that reliable narrators could err, and weak narrators could sometimes transmit accurately. Contextual clues were the tools they used to discern these exceptions. This nuanced approach distinguishes the true Hadith critic from those who merely apply superficial rules.

Al-Mursal al-Khafi (Hidden Discontinuity) and its Relation to *Tadlis*

Al-Mursal al-Khafi (hidden discontinuity) occurs when a narrator transmits from a contemporary, they did not meet or from whom they did not hear, but uses wording that implies a connection. Hafiz Ibn Hajar[13] defined it as originating "from a contemporary who did not meet the one who narrated to him, but there is an intermediary between them,"[14] with some adding the scenario of meeting but not hearing.

While some later scholars included *irsal khafi* under the umbrella of *tadlis*, others, like Hafiz Ibn Hajar, distinguished between the two, arguing that *tadlis* generally involves established hearing from the sheikh in other instances, whereas *irsal khafi* involves no hearing at all. However, the application of the term "*tadlis*" by early scholars to scenarios of non-meeting or not hearing suggests a closer relationship between the two concepts in their understanding.

A significant point of contention revolves around the narrator's intention. Some scholars argue that if the narrator intends to create the impression of hearing (*iham al-sama'*), it constitutes *tadlis*, regardless of whether they met or heard from the individual in other instances. If the intention is not to create this impression, it is considered *irsal khafi*.

Ultimately, the distinction between *tadlis* and *irsal khafi* is nuanced, with the early scholars often using "*tadlis*" in a broader sense that could encompass scenarios later categorized as *irsal* khafi.

Conclusion

The concept of *tadlīs* in the science of ḥadīth criticism cannot be reduced to a simplistic binary of acceptance or rejection. Rather, it represents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon involving various forms of concealment or ambiguity in the *isnād* and occasionally the *matn*. Each instance of *tadlīs* must be evaluated within its specific historical, linguistic, and contextual framework. The early scholars (*al-mutaqaddimūn*), including authorities such as al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn Ḥanbal, and Ibn al-Madīnī, emphasized interpretive

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[13] Al-Sakhāwī, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *Al-Badr al-Ṭāliʿ bi-Maḥāsin man Baʿda al-Qāniʿ* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, n.d.), 1:87; Ziriklī, Khayr al-Dīn, *Al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li'l-Malāyīn, 2002), 1:8, 1:178.

[14] Ṭaḥḥān, Maḥmūd. *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 2004), 97–98.

discernment and contextual awareness over rigid classifications. Their method combined deep insight into narrator behavior with a profound understanding of transmission norms, allowing them to distinguish between harmful and negligible forms of *tadlīs*.

Later scholars, particularly in the post-codification era, attempted to standardize the identification and classification of *mudallisūn* and developed categorical rulings. While such efforts added structure, they sometimes lacked the nuance and flexibility of the early critics. Therefore, for any serious student or scholar of ḥadīth sciences, a deep comprehension of the various types of *tadlīs*—such as *Tadlīs al-Isnād*, *Tadlīs al-Shuyūkh*, and others—as well as the contextual principles used to evaluate them, is indispensable. A revival of the methodical, balanced, and context-driven approach of the early imams remains vital for maintaining the integrity and depth of this crucial Islamic discipline.

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