

LECTURE 1

ILM AR-RIJAL

- A. The discussion will be on the major themes and topics of Ilm ar-Rijal.
- B. The discussion will try to be based on scholarly research, it will try to go in depth into those matters within the Ilm that justify such a consideration, and just summarize matters within the Ilm that are not as fruitful.
- C. Initially in our introduction, we will mention a few points concerning the history of the Ilm, taking this from the authoritative sources that have reached us that can speak about it, especially, the two Fihristis authored by at-Tusi and an-Najashi, whereby we will try to reconstruct using these as references some milestones in this Ilm in our history, then we will define the Ilm, give the domain it extends to, and discuss the need or importance of the Ilm.

HISTORY OF THE ILM

First, it is established without doubt that this Ilm is an innovation of the Muslims after the dawn of Islam, thus we do not see anyone apart from us having formulated such an Ilm before, thus it has no comparison or parallel in the other faiths or civilizations.

--> We do not mean by this that the Uqala (posessors of intellect) before Islam did not try to ascertain the Wathaqa (trustworthiness) of individuals before accepting their words; but what we mean is that there was no body of knowledge exclusive for this purpose.

Second, we know touch upon the question of the first author to write upon this Ilm [from the Shia]

--> Previously we had opined that the first to author a book and write on this Ilm was Ubaydullah b. Abi Rafi, secretary of Imam Ali, and one of his closest companions.

--> The reason we concluded so was based on the words of both at-Tusi and an-Najashi in their respective Fihristis, whereby they have recorded under this Ubaydullah's Tarjuma (entry) that he had authored a book wherein he mentioned all the Rijal from the Ashab of Imam Ali who participated with him in his wars (being on his side).

--> Using this as evidence, al-Muhaqiq al-Tihrani ruled that Ubaydullah was the first author on Ilm ar-Rijal, and to prove this he (in his Dhariah) says that the aim of the author, that is Ubaydullah, was not simply to enumerate the names of these personages, but there was a form of Ta'dil (strengthening) and Tajrih (weakening) inherent in such an endeavour, this is because Ubaydullah was mentioning only those who participated in the wars on the side of Ali [and this acted as a form of Madh (praise) for them in opposition to those who did not take part, who are implicitly blamed (Qadh) for not participating] this makes its contents fall under the domain of Ilm ar-Rijal.

--> Except, this in of itself is not enough to award Ubaydullah this accolade (of being the first author to have written a book on this Ilm)

Why?

* We cannot ascertain the author's aim in writing this book, i.e. did it have a Rijali purpose or not? this is especially so as the book is extant and has not reached us for us to study its contents.

[Yes, from the title of the book and the way at-Tusi and an-Najashi describe it to us, we do know that Ubyadullah wrote down the names of those companions of Imam Ali who participated with him in those wars, but the question is – for what purpose did he write it?, it seems more logical that this was a historical work of a particular period]

* For it to be a work on Ilm ar-Rijal, the author would have to have a Rijali purpose in mind, and that is establishing the Wathaqa (trustworthiness) of the men he lists or the lack of it, and we have no indicator that he goes on to do this in the book's body.

Thus, to answer this question, we have no option but to agree with Sayyid Hasan al-Sadr [in his Ta'sis al-Shia] wherein he says that Abdallah b. Jabalah was the first to write on this Ilm.

--> He bases this on the listing of the books under his (Abdallah's) Tarjuma (entry) by an-Najashi in his Fihrist, one of the books that an-Najashi attributes to this Abdallah b. Jabalah is a Kitab ar-Rijal, which looking at the genre, would consist of listing the names of the Rijal of the Hadith and their associated attributes.

--> It should be noted that Abdallah b. Jabalah was a companion of Imam al-Kadhim and died in the year 219 A.H.

Third, to know the importance and the high status that this Ilm had among the Ashab (companions of the Imams) and the Salaf (early predessecors), I will provide two evidences:

(I) Any cursory glance at the lists of books authored by these Ashab and Salaf as provided by at-Tusi and an-Najashi in their two Fihrists, reveals that quite a lot of books were authored on Ilm ar-Rijal. Many of the Ashab had authored books titled 'Mashyakha' and 'Kitab ar-Rijal'.

* The books of this nature were counted and they say that they reach approximately **120** books, from the time of al-Hasan b. al-Mahbub (who wrote a famous 'Mashyakha') to the time of at-Tusi and an-Najashi, if this does not show their concern for such an Ilm what does?

* It should be noted here that these were not all encyclopedic works [exhausting all the Rijal], rather most were works dealing with specific categories of Rijal, example, Ibn Uqdah (the famous Zaydi), wrote separate works dealing with the Rijal narrating from Imam as-Sadiq, Imam al-Kadhim and Imam ar-Ridha.

* To get a full listing of these books of the Ashab and Salaf on Ilm ar-Rijal, one can refer to volume 10 of al-Dhariah or more beneficial for this purpose would be to read Mufasal al-Maqal by the same author (i.e. of al-Dhariah), wherein he lists them expansively.

It serves no harm to mention here some important points:

--> It is not necessary that only Tawthiq and Tadhif of the Rijal be mentioned and that no other biographical details and personal information be included on the Rijal in a book for that book to be called - a book on Ilm ar-Rijal.

Indeed you will be hard pressed to find a book considered a book on Ilm ar-Rijal that does not diverge and mention biographical and personal material about the Rijal even if most of these data have no bearing on the Wathaqa of the Rijal or lack of it, and in strict terms have no place in books on Ilm ar-Rijal.

--> It is also not necessary that all the Rijal mentioned in the book of Ilm ar-Rijal have clear/explicit Tawthiq and Tadhif for it to be considered a book on Ilm ar-Rijal.

Indeed most of the books considered books on Ilm ar-Rijal do not have Tawthiq and Tadhif for the majority of the Rijal mentioned within, example, at-Tusi in his Rijal records names of about 6000 narrators, out of these only about 300 have Tawthiq or Tadhif.

--> In short, all that is required for a book to be considered a book on Ilm ar-Rijal is whether the author had a Rijali purpose in mind or not, in other words, does he make Tawthiq and Tajrih of at least some of the Rijal he mentions, or consciously provide information that leads to Tawthiq and Tajrih of them.

(II) We can also look at the words of at-Tusi in two instances to observe the importance placed on this Ilm by those who were near the time of the Imams.

--> In the preface to his Fihrist, at-Tusi mentions clearly that most of the previous Ulama had authored personal Fihrists.

What were Fihrists?

These were works wherein the author lists the books that he possesses and narrates to others, he legitimises his possession of these books by providing his Turuq (paths) to their original authors, most of these Fihrists also contained evaluation of the original authors, and details that could make Tawthiq and Tadhif of the Rijal mentioned within the path to the books, thus falling in the domain of Ilm ar-Rijal.

--> These early Fihrists did not reach us, but we know what kind of works they are since the Fihrists of ar-Tusi and an-Najashi have reached us, and we see what kind of works they are.

--> The only difference between the Fihrists of at-Tusi and an-Najashi and the previous Fihrists of the Ulama before them was that the previous Fihrists were only concerned with listing the books the individual author possessed and had chains to i.e. they were personal in nature, and not listing the comprehensive legacy of the shia authors as a whole, which at-Tusi and an-Najashi tried to achieve, inspired by one Ahmad b. al-Husayn b. Ubyadullah al-Ghadhairi.

--> In his Uddah, in the section on Khabar al-Wahid, at-Tusi says:

"Verily, we have found that the Taifah has discerned the Rijal who narrate these Akhbar, so they have made Tawthiq of the Thiqah amongst them, and made Tadhif of the Dhuafa amongst them, so they have distinguished those upon whom we can depend on in their Hadith and Riwayah, and those upon whom there can be no dependence, and they have praised the praiseworthy, and blamed the blameworthy, and they said about various Rijal, this one is accused in his Hadith, and that one is a liar, and so and so makes mistakes in narration, and Fulan is an opponent in Madhab and I'tiqad, and Fulan is Waqifi, and Fulan is Fathi, and the rest of the condescending attributes that they have recalled, and they authored for this purpose books, and they excluded some Rijal's (narrations) from the collection of what they themselves narrate, this reached to an extent that one of them - when he rejects the content of a Hadith - he looks at its Sanad, and weakens it due to the ones narrating it, **this was their practise from the olden times up to the current'**.

I say: Can there be any greater evidence of their regard for the Rijal than this, and in it at-Tusi says that this was their collective culture, and that they authored works on it, and that they deemed Isnad analysis unavoidable, and that they considered some Thiqah and others not.

DEFINITION OF ILM AR-RIJAL

There have been many definitions of this Ilm, but the best definition for it would be the one that answers the question -

What do we want from Ilm ar-Rijal? What purpose does this Ilm serve?

I say openly that this Ilm would not have existed if we did not have Hadith.

In other words Ilm ar-Rijal exists only to serve the Hadith.

Any Hadith has two parts, Isnad (chain) and Matn (content). To accept the Hadith's Matn (content) we have to study its Isnad (chain).

What is the Isnad of a Hadith?

Names of the Rijal who narrate the the Matn of the Hadith one after the other up to the compiler of the book of Hadith that has reached us. Ilm ar-Rijal studies these men, so that it can authenticate the Isnad (chain), thereby allowing the acceptance of the Matn (content).

A definition that serves such a purpose, and that is most complete, is what is found in al-Dhariah, by al-Muhaqiq al-Tihrani, he says, and I quote him -

"It is an Ilm (a science) that investigates the attributes of a narrator of a narration, (only those) attributes that have a bearing in the acceptance of his narrations or not".

In other words we study the attributes of a narrator of a narration, and based on that study conclude whether the narrator's narrations are to be accepted or not.

What are the attributes of a narrator that have a bearing to acceptance of his narrations?

1. his Hal (status) in terms of Wathaqa (trustworthiness) or lack of it.
2. his Tabaqa.
3. unique characteristics that might differentiate him from others who share the same name [in case of the so-called Mushtarakat].
4. his Dhabt (meticulousness) and how he transmits his Hadith.

Why do we need to study the Wathaqa of a narrator?

--> The Hujjiyyah (probative force) of accepting a Matn of a Hadith is based on the Wathaqa of its narrators in its Isnad, and the only Ilm that studies who is Thiqah or not is this Ilm.

--> It is well known that when there occurs apparent conflict between two Hadith, one way of resolving such a conflict is by taking the Hadith whose narrators are more Awthaq (trustworthy), the only Ilm that classifies the Rijal based on their degree of Wathaqa is Ilm ar-Rijal.

Why do we need to study the Taabaqa (generational layer) of a narrator?

--> There might be a Sanad that consists of all the Rijal Thiqat, but if we do not know the respective Tabaqat of the Rijal within it we still cannot rule on its Sihha (authenticity).

This is because apart from the Wathaqa of all the Rijal in the Sanad we still need to check for its Ittisal (connectivity), that is, the well known rule that in most cases a narrator can only narrate from someone who is in his own Tabaqa or in the Tabaqa above him, and the one who narrates from him has to be in his own Tabaqa or in the Tabaqa below him.

If such a rule is not met, example, someone narrating from another who is two Tabaqa's away from him we can confidently surmise that the narrator has dropped some of the intermediaries from the chain [thus the chain is not connected], as it would be physically impossible for the two to have met looking at the time-gap between the two.

Example, Muhammad b. Yahya al-Attar who is Thiqah cannot narrate from al-Hasan b. Ali b. Fadhal who is also Thiqah, since the former is in the 8th Tabaqa and the latter in the 6th Tabaqa, thus there should be an intermediary between the two from the 7th Tabaqa, thus any Hadith with such an Isnad where al-Attar is apparently narrating from al-Hasan b. Ali b. Fadhal is not Sahih.

While it is true that we have a paucity of death dates for narrators, but we map out the Tabaqat using other indicators such as knowing teacher-student and father-son relationships.

Why do we need to know the unique characteristics of a narrator?

--> We have some narrators who appear with the same name in Isnads, and may even be in the same Tabaqa, but they do not share the same Hal (i.e. both are not Thiqah), the only way to differentiate between them would be to identify some unique characteristics that one of them may possess and use it to make a categorical judgement.

This is where the importance of the geographical locations of a narrator provided in the Tarjuma may have importance, where we know that one narrator may be, for example, from Kufah and the other from Qumm, we can then look at the circles from which they narrate to differentiate them.

In this area much progress has been made by the Muta'akhir scholars, a much favoured method here is to look at the pattern of those who usually narrate from the ambiguous individual and the one he usually narrates from in exclusion to others – so as to identify him.

For example, previously, Shahid II [in his Sharh Lumah] used to declare all the Hadith containing Muhammad b. Qays as Dhaif, since there are multiple Muhammad b. Qays, some are Thiqah and others Dhaif, and he could not differentiate between them, modern application of Ilm ar-Rijal is now agreed that the Muhammad b. Qays from whom Yusuf b. Aqil and Asim b. Humayd narrate – is the Thiqah Muhammad b. Qays, in this way we can declare these Ahadith as Sahih.

Why do we need to know the Dhabt of narrators and their mode of transmission?

--> Some narrators lost their memories in what was essentially a verbal transmission mechanism, others made frequent mistakes, this has an impact on the quality of the Hadith they transmit, knowing them makes us decide to accept their narrations or not, and if so, under what condition.

--> Also, the mode of transmission counts, did the narrator have Sam'ah alone (hearing) or was there Kitabah (writing down) of the Hadith, has a particular Hadith work reached us through Ijaza (certification) i.e. Munawalah, or did somebody just 'discover' a long lost manuscript from the marketplace.

THE TOPIC OF ILM AR-RIJAL

The topic/domain of this Ilm is confined to the narrators of Hadith and their attributes that have a bearing in the acceptance of the narrations.

Thus we look at their Hal (Tawthiq/Tarjih), their Tabaqat, their unique identifying properties in case of ambiguity, and their Dhabt and method of transmission.

The topic is not about any Rajul or Ashab of the Aimmah, it is those who narrated narrations from them that concern us in Ilm ar-Rijal.

We see that some make mistakes here, they include in books of Ilm ar-Rijal those who are not its topic, example, some give Tarjuma of the Ashab of Imam al-Husayn in books of Ilm ar-Rijal, as was done in Tanqih al-Maqal, the truth is that most of these martyrs did not narrate Ahadith from the Imam, so their presence in books of Rijal is not correct, others include all the Ashab of an Imam, even though some of these Ashab despite their prominence are not narrators of Hadith.

It should also come as no surprise that there are some mentioned in the two Fihrists of at-Tusi and an-Najashi that are not part of this Ilm, remember that the purpose of the Fihrist is to record authors of books that have reached to at-Tusi and an-Najashi, thus there are people mentioned in the Fihrist who have just authored books on Kalaam, for example, Banu Nawbakht, and have not narrated any narrations, these are not covered by this Ilm.

On the other hand, there are people not mentioned in the two Fihrist who are covered by this Ilm, that is, the Mashayikh of Ijaza, who have not authored any books, but they have narrated narrations, these cannot appear in the Fihrist as they are not authors, but they are definitely an integral part of this Ilm.

All that happened to make these two Fihrists important in Ilm ar-Rijal is that at-Tusi and an-Najashi also listed authors of books of Hadith, example, Usul written by the Ashab of the Aimmah, and Kutub of other narrators of Hadith, that reached them, and decided to take it upon themselves to also mention with it their Hal - from Tawthiq and lack of it, and thus it becomes an important source book for Ilm ar-Rijal.

But their principal aim was not to make Tawthiq and Tadhif, Jarh and Tadil, Madh and Qadh, rather when one reads their prefaces, the aim was to defend the Shia against claims of cultural and literary deficiency.

Thus I say that this Ilm only covers the narrators of Hadith.

EARLIEST BOOKS COVERING ILM AR- RIJAL THAT HAVE REACHED US IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

1. Rijal al-Barqi by Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Khalid al-Barqi
2. Ikhtiyar Ma'rifat al-Rijal (abridged by at-Tusi from al-Kashi's original)
3. Fihrist of at-Tusi
4. Fihrist of an-Najashi
5. Rijal of at-Tusi
6. Rijal attributed to Ibn al-Ghadhairi