

The Expression “Gharib Min Hadha al-Wajh” in Jami al-Tirmidhi: An Applied Study of Hadith Critical Methodology

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Abstract

This study examines Imam al-Tirmidhi's critical expression “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” (“gharīb through this particular route”) as employed in Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī. The expression is important because it reflects the nuanced relationship between singularity in transmission, isnād criticism, and the overall evaluation of a hadith. The study aims to clarify the expression's semantic scope, identify what al-Tirmidhī intends by restricting gharābah to a particular wajh (route), and demonstrate its implications through applied analysis of selected narrations. The research employs an inductive approach to identify relevant occurrences in Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī and an analytical approach to examine the transmission routes, narrator assessments, corroborating reports, and the judgments of hadith critics. Two representative cases are examined. The first is a narration that al-Tirmidhī describes as “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” while its transmitters are assessed between thiqah and ṣadūq; its singularity therefore does not necessarily undermine its acceptability. The second is a narration concerning the virtue of Sūrat al-Dukhān whose chain contains 'Umar b. Abī Khath'am and Sufyān b. Wakī', both criticised by hadith scholars; in this case, gharābah is accompanied by substantial weakness in the isnād. The study concludes that “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” should not be treated as an automatic declaration of weakness. Rather, it normally identifies singularity in a particular transmission route, while the final evaluation depends on the reliability of narrators and the existence and quality of other routes. The finding demonstrates the precision of al-Tirmidhī's critical vocabulary and highlights the need to read his terminology contextually rather than in isolation.

Keywords: Imam Al-Tirmidhī, Jāmi' Al-Tirmidhī, Gharīb Min Hādhā Al-Wajh, Hadith Criticism, Critical Terminology, Takhrīj, Isnād Analysis

Introduction

Hadith criticism is a foundational discipline of Islamic scholarship because it provides the methodological means to distinguish reliable Prophetic reports from narrations that cannot be established. Classical hadith scholars developed a sophisticated vocabulary for describing the status of transmission, the reliability of narrators, the continuity of chains, and the occurrence of singularity. Among the leading figures in this discipline is Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī, whose *Jāmiʿ* is distinguished not only by its collection of Prophetic traditions but also by its explicit comments on their status, transmission routes, narrator conditions, and the practice of jurists. The source study describes his method as combining hadith and jurisprudence, judging narrations, attending to hidden defects, noting jurists' positions, identifying unusual transmissions, and presenting supporting routes where relevant (al-Suyūṭī, 1424 AH; al-Tirmidhī, 1975).

One of al-Tirmidhī's recurring expressions is “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh.” The expression is especially significant because the term *gharīb* can be misunderstood if it is automatically equated with weakness. In hadith terminology, *gharīb* generally refers to a report in which a narrator is alone at some point in the chain. This may occur at the beginning of the chain, in which case it is commonly described as *gharīb muṭlaq*, or within one of its levels, where it is described as *gharīb nisbi* or *muqayyad*. The source study emphasises that al-Tirmidhī's addition “min hādhā al-wajh” normally restricts the singularity to a specific route or *isnād* rather than declaring that the entire hadith is transmitted through only one route (al-Tirmidhī, 1975; al-ʿAsqalānī, 1986).

This distinction has methodological importance. If the expression is interpreted as a judgment of weakness by itself, the reader may overlook the possibility that the same report has another route or that the particular route, although singular, is transmitted by acceptable narrators. Conversely, the existence of the expression does not prevent a particular *isnād* from being weak when its transmitters are criticised. Thus, the meaning of the expression must be determined in relation to the *isnād* under discussion, the other routes of transmission, and the broader critical comments made by al-Tirmidhī and other hadith authorities.

Accordingly, this study investigates the expression “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” through an applied reading of selected examples from *Jāmiʿ* al-Tirmidhī. It addresses three questions: (1) What does *gharīb* mean in the terminology of hadith critics? (2) What is the methodological significance of al-Tirmidhī's qualification “min hādhā al-wajh”? Moreover, (3) how does the expression function when applied to narrations whose chains differ in strength? The study argues that the expression primarily describes a feature of transmission and should not be isolated from the complete *isnād* evaluation.

Research Methodology

This study follows two complementary methods. First, the inductive method identifies and collects occurrences in *Jāmiʿ* al-Tirmidhī where the expression “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” or closely related wording appears. Second, the analytical method traces selected narrations to their sources, examines individual transmitters in the *isnād*, compares available routes, and considers hadith critics' evaluations. This approach follows the methodological orientation of the source study, which treats al-Tirmidhī's terminology as a critical statement that must be

understood through the transmission context rather than through lexical interpretation alone.

The applied analysis focuses on two representative cases preserved in the source article. The first is the narration associated with Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī and recorded by al-Tirmidhī in the Qur’anic exegesis section as Hadith 3186. The second is the narration concerning the virtue of Sūrat al-Dukhān, recorded by al-Tirmidhī as Hadith 2888. The first case illustrates a route whose narrators are generally assessed as reliable or acceptable despite its singularity; the second illustrates a case in which the singular route contains criticised narrators and therefore cannot be treated as acceptable merely because the terminology is limited to a particular route.

Imam al-Tirmidhī and His Critical Method

Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 279 AH) was one of the major hadith scholars of the third Islamic century. Classical biographical sources cited in the source study describe him as an imam distinguished by memorisation and precision. Ibn Ḥajar describes him among the leading authorities whose example was followed in preservation and mastery, while al-Mizzī places him among the prominent hadith memorisers (al-Dhahabī, 1985; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 1986; al-Mizzī, 1980). He travelled in pursuit of knowledge and studied with major scholars including al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, and Qutaybah b. Sa‘īd.

His *Jāmi‘* is organised into thematic and juristic chapters and brings together narrations on legal rulings, creed, manners, tafsīr, virtues, and other subjects. A notable feature is al-Tirmidhī’s practice of commenting on the status of narrations and, in many cases, explaining defects, narrator conditions, routes of transmission, and the practice of scholars. The source study summarises his methodology through ten characteristics: juristic arrangement of chapters, combining hadith with jurisprudence, judging narrations, attention to hidden defects, mention of juristic schools, attention to gharābah, mention of supporting narrations, explanation of unusual terms, clarification of scholarly practice, and influence from the methodology of al-Bukhārī.

This methodological context is essential for understanding his expression “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh.” Al-Tirmidhī does not use critical vocabulary in a vacuum. His comments frequently interact with the chain of transmission and with other routes. Therefore, a terminological expression such as gharīb must be read together with the surrounding comments and the actual isnād evidence.

The Concept of Gharīb in Hadith Terminology

Lexically, gharīb refers to something isolated, distant, uncommon, or unusual. In hadith terminology, it describes a report transmitted by only one narrator at a particular point in the chain. The source study distinguishes two broad forms. Gharīb muṭlaq occurs when singularity is found at the origin of the isnād, such as a Companion transmitting a report alone. Gharīb muqayyad or nisbi occurs when singularity is restricted to a particular level, narrator, region, or route (al-‘Asqalānī, 1986).

The phrase “min hādhā al-wajh” narrows the field of reference. In this context, wajh can mean a route, transmission line, or isnād. Hence, “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” indicates that the

report is unusual or singular through that particular route. It does not, by itself, establish that no other route exists. The source study therefore identifies the expression as normally belonging to the category of restricted or relative singularity.

This distinction also explains why *gharābah* and weakness should not be conflated. A narration can be described as *ṣaḥīḥ gharīb* or *ḥasan gharīb* when its transmitters and other conditions satisfy the relevant standards. Conversely, a *gharīb* narration can be weak if its route contains a narrator whose reliability is deficient. The critical task is therefore to determine the condition of the specific route and, where relevant, its relationship to other transmissions.

The Expression “Gharīb Min Hādhā al-Wajh” in Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī

When al-Tirmidhī says “*gharīb min hādhā al-wajh*,” the source study interprets his statement as normally indicating that the particular route under consideration contains singularity. At the same time, the hadith may have an origin through other routes. The phrase consequently performs a precise critical function: it informs the reader about the transmission route without necessarily issuing a global judgment that the hadith is weak.

Four implications follow from this usage. First, it identifies a feature of *isnād* singularity. Second, it alerts the reader to the possibility of variation among transmission routes. Third, it demonstrates al-Tirmidhī’s attention to critical detail. Fourth, it leaves the overall hadith judgment dependent on the narrators’ quality and the total evidentiary picture. The source study explicitly notes that a report described as *gharīb* may be sound, acceptable, or weak, depending on the condition of its narrators and routes.

The phrase should therefore be distinguished from the broader statement “*ḥadīth gharīb*.” The latter may refer more broadly to the report’s singularity and requires contextual analysis to determine whether that singularity is absolute or relative. “*Gharīb min hādhā al-wajh*,” by contrast, expressly attaches the singularity to a particular route, making its semantic scope narrower and more precise.

Applied Case Study I: A Gharīb Route with Acceptable Narrators

The first example concerns a narration transmitted through Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī and recorded by al-Tirmidhī in the section on Qur’anic exegesis as Hadith 3186. In the source study, al-Tirmidhī comments that it is a “*ḥadīth gharīb min hādhā al-wajh*” and notes that it is known through the route of Abū Mūsā, while other transmissions exist in a related form. Al-Nasā‘ī also reports the narration in al-Sunan al-Kubrā, and Ibn Ḥibbān in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, with the source study documenting the relevant routes (al-Tirmidhī, 1975; Ibn Ḥibbān, 1988; al-Nasā‘ī, 2001).

The source study examines the principal transmitters in the route. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥakam b. Abī Ziyād is presented as *ṣadūq* in Ibn Ḥajar’s evaluation, while Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī is reported as having been judged *ṣadūq* or *thiqah* by several critics. ‘Awf al-A‘rābī is characterised as *thiqah* and reliable, and Qusāmah b. Zuhayr is likewise presented as *thiqah* in the cited biographical sources. The Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī requires no discussion in terms of narrator criticism (Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 1952; al-‘Asqalānī, 1986; al-Mizzī, 1980).

On this basis, the source study evaluates the *isnād* as *ḥasan*. Its key methodological conclusion is that the singularity of this route does not, by itself, damage the narration. The route is

unusual, but the narrators are generally acceptable, and other evidence concerning the report exists. Thus, al-Tirmidhī's qualification "min hādhā al-wajh" should be understood as a statement about the route rather than as a blanket declaration of weakness.

This example demonstrates the difference between two propositions: "the route is singular" and "the hadith is weak." They are not logically identical. A singular route can be acceptable when its narrators meet the relevant standards and when no defect undermines the report. Consequently, the term *gharīb* functions here as a descriptive critical category rather than as an automatic negative verdict.

Applied Case Study II: A Gharīb Route with Significant Weakness

The second example concerns a narration about the virtue of Sūrat al-Dukhān. Al-Tirmidhī records it as Hadith 2888 and comments that it is *gharīb* and that it is not known except through this route. The source study also traces the report to al-Dārimī, al-Marwazī's Mukhtaṣar Qiyām al-Layl, and Ibn Ḥibbān, documenting related routes or comparable wording (al-Tirmidhī, 1975; al-Dārimī, 2000; al-Marwazī, 1988; Ibn Ḥibbān, 1988).

The critical difference from the first case lies in the isnād's condition. The route contains Sufyān b. Wakī' and 'Umar b. Abī Khath'am. The source study reports substantial criticism of Sufyān b. Wakī' and identifies 'Umar b. Abī Khath'am as a seriously weak transmitter. Other transmitters in the chain are presented as more acceptable, including Zayd b. al-Ḥubāb, Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr, Abū Salamah, and Abū Hurayrah, but the presence of the criticised transmitters materially affects the isnād (al-'Asqalānī, 1986; al-Mizzī, 1980).

The source study therefore judges the chain weak and concludes that this route cannot establish the report as authoritative proof. Here again, the expression *gharīb* does not itself create the weakness. Rather, the weakness arises from the transmitters' condition in this specific route. This case is methodologically important because it shows that "gharīb min hādhā al-wajh" can coexist with weakness, but the cause of weakness must be demonstrated through isnād criticism.

Together, the two examples provide a useful analytical contrast. In the first, singularity occurs with generally acceptable transmitters and does not necessarily undermine acceptability. In the second, singularity is accompanied by serious narrator criticism and therefore results in a weak chain. The critical meaning of *gharīb* remains principally descriptive of transmission; the final evaluation depends on the total isnād evidence.

Discussion

The applied findings support a contextual interpretation of al-Tirmidhī's terminology. The expression "gharīb min hādhā al-wajh" is best understood as a restricted statement about a particular transmission route. It does not automatically imply that the hadith as a whole is weak. This interpretation aligns with the broader principle of hadith criticism, in which singularity and narrator reliability represent distinct dimensions of evaluation.

The first case demonstrates that a singular route can remain within the sphere of acceptance when its narrators are judged reliable or acceptable. The second case demonstrates that a singular route can also be weak when one or more transmitters are severely criticised.

Therefore, the phrase has an evidentiary function: it directs the researcher to investigate the particular route. It does not remove the need for a complete isnād judgment.

The distinction between “ḥadīth gharīb” and “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” is especially valuable for contemporary researchers. The former is broader and may require contextual evidence to determine whether the singularity is absolute or relative. The latter is explicitly restricted. This restriction reflects al-Tirmidhī’s precision in differentiating between the unusualness of one route and the overall status of the report.

The findings also highlight the importance of takhrīj in studying classical critical terminology. A researcher should not stop at the wording of al-Tirmidhī’s judgment. Instead, the report should trace it to other collections, compare the routes, and examine the narrators through major biographical and critical sources. The source study itself demonstrates this method by consulting al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā’ī, al-Dārimī, Ibn Ḥibbān, al-Marwazī, and the principal works of narrator criticism.

At a broader methodological level, al-Tirmidhī’s terminology illustrates why classical hadith judgments should be read as part of an integrated critical system. His use of gharīb interacts with judgments such as ḥasan, ṣaḥīḥ, and other comments on routes and narrators. The phrase under examination therefore helps explain how al-Tirmidhī communicates nuanced information about transmission without reducing every form of singularity to weakness.

Conclusion

This study has examined the expression “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” in Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī through an applied analysis of selected narrations. The evidence indicates that the expression normally denotes singularity or unusualness restricted to a particular transmission route. It should therefore not be interpreted, in isolation, as an automatic declaration that the hadith is weak.

The two applied cases demonstrate the methodological point clearly. The first narration is described as gharīb through a particular route while its transmitters are generally acceptable, resulting in an evaluation that does not treat the singularity as harmful. The second narration is also characterised by singularity, but its chain contains severely criticised transmitters, making the route weak. The difference between the two cases arises from the condition of the isnād rather than from the mere occurrence of the word gharīb.

The study consequently recommends that researchers examining al-Tirmidhī’s critical terminology combine textual analysis with takhrīj, isnād criticism, narrator evaluation, and comparison of transmission routes. Further research should examine the remaining occurrences of “gharīb min hādhā al-wajh” across Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī and compare them systematically with his other expressions, including “ḥadīth gharīb” and “lā na’rifuhu illā min hādhā al-wajh.” Such work can contribute to a more comprehensive reconstruction of al-Tirmidhī’s critical methodology.

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