

Scientific Guidelines to be Considered when Describing the Imams of Jarh and Ta'dil as Strict or Lenient

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Abstract

Describing the imams of jarh and ta'dil as either strict or lenient is a significant issue in the science of hadith criticism, as such descriptions directly affect the evaluation and acceptance or rejection of their critical judgments. This issue becomes particularly important when the judgments of jarh and ta'dil conflict, as the perceived level of strictness or leniency of a critic may influence the process of weighing and reconciling their statements. This study examines the validity of applying such descriptions to the imams of jarh and ta'dil and identifies the scientific and methodological guidelines that should govern this practice. It aims to clarify the criteria to consider before describing a hadith critic as strict or lenient and to examine the implications of such descriptions for the acceptance or rejection of their critical judgments. The study employs an inductive-analytical methodology by tracing the statements of hadith scholars concerning this issue and examining selected practical examples of the critical judgments made by the imams of jarh and ta'dil. It pays particular attention to the evidence, contextual circumstances, and methodological considerations underlying these judgments. The findings indicate that describing the imams of jarh and ta'dil as strict or lenient should be based on comprehensive induction and systematic examination of their statements rather than on isolated judgments. The study also identifies several scientific and methodological guidelines to follow before assigning such descriptions, as neglecting them may misinterpret the imams' critical judgments and affect the process of preference when conflicting evaluations arise. This study contributes to establishing a more systematic methodological framework for understanding the approaches of the imams of jarh and ta'dil and for regulating the application of the concepts of strictness and leniency in hadith criticism. It recommends further comparative and applied studies that examine the methodologies of individual hadith critics through comprehensive analysis of their critical statements.

Keywords: Jarh and Ta'dil, Methodological Guidelines, Strictness and Leniency, Imams of Jarh and Ta'dil

A Theoretical Foundation for the Concepts of Strictness and Leniency in Hadith Criticism

A scholarly examination of the characterisation of *jarh wa ta'dil* scholars as either strict or lenient requires, first and foremost, a careful examination of the concepts of strictness and leniency within the framework of hadith criticism. Describing a hadith critic as *strict* (*mutashaddid*) or *lenient* (*mutasāhil*) is not merely a descriptive observation; rather, it constitutes a critical judgment that requires clear methodological justification. Such a characterisation must therefore be grounded in a precise understanding of these concepts according to the terminology and methodological principles employed by hadith scholars.

In this context, the assessment of a critic's methodological tendency cannot be based on isolated judgments or individual examples. Rather, it requires a systematic analysis of the critic's rulings and their comparison with the assessments of other leading *imams of jarh wa ta'dil*. Through such comparative analysis, it becomes possible to determine whether a particular critic consistently adopts a stricter or more lenient approach in evaluating narrators, rather than merely displaying occasional differences in judgment.

Errors and inconsistencies have nevertheless occurred in the application of these descriptions, largely because of an inadequate understanding of what constitutes strictness and leniency in hadith criticism. Consequently, some scholars of *jarh wa ta'dil* have been characterised as strict or lenient without sufficient consideration of the methodological principles underlying their judgments. Such generalisations may inaccurately represent a critic's methodology and, in turn, affect the evaluation of his statements about the reliability or weakness of narrators.

Accordingly, establishing a clear theoretical foundation for the concepts of strictness and leniency is essential before examining the criteria used to characterise individual hadith critics. This clarification provides the necessary methodological framework for determining when such descriptions can legitimately be applied. It ensures that judgments concerning the methodological tendencies of *jarh wa ta'dil* scholars are based on systematic analysis, comparative evidence, and established principles of hadith criticism.

The Concept of Strictness

The term *tashaddud* (strictness) derives from the Arabic root sh-d-d (shiddah), which denotes firmness, severity, or hardness and contrasts with softness, ease, and leniency. The term may apply to both tangible objects and abstract qualities. Linguistically, *tashdīd* also conveys the meaning of intensification, as opposed to mitigation or easing (Ibn Manzūr, 1955).

In the technical context of hadith criticism, however, the concept of strictness does not appear to have been given a single, comprehensive, and universally accepted definition by the classical hadith scholars. Unlike established technical terms in *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*, *tashaddud* is more commonly understood through the way hadith scholars described the methodological tendencies of particular critics in matters of *al-jarh wa al-ta'dil*. Accordingly, later scholars largely derived their definitions from examining the judgments and practices of hadith critics rather than from a single formal definition established by the early authorities.

Based on the statements and methodological practices of hadith critics, strictness in *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* may be understood as excessive severity in evaluating narrators, whereby a critic issues disparaging judgments or rejects a narrator or his narrations based on relatively minor shortcomings that would not ordinarily warrant such a judgment. This may include criticism based on a minor error, a limited lapse, a relatively insignificant fault, or a legitimate difference of opinion concerning matters of doctrine or jurisprudence. In this sense, the strict critic tends to extend criticism beyond what is proportionate to the actual defect found in the narrator.

Al-Dhahabī (1990) illustrates this tendency by describing excessive criticism as a situation in which a narrator is weakened by two or three mistakes or criticised for a minor fault, resulting in a judgment that goes beyond what the evidence reasonably warrants. This indicates that strictness is not simply a matter of applying rigorous standards; rather, it becomes problematic when the degree of criticism is disproportionate to the nature and significance of the defect.

Thus, strictness in this context may be viewed as excessive caution and scrutiny in evaluating narrators and hadith reports. A critic characterised by such an approach may impose more demanding conditions for accepting a narrator or a narration than other hadith critics. Consequently, reports or narrators that other scholars may accept could be rejected by a strict critic because they do not satisfy his higher threshold of acceptance.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish legitimate methodological rigour from excessive strictness. A critic who applies demanding standards consistently and on established principles should not automatically be characterised as *mutashaddid*. The description of strictness becomes methodologically meaningful only when the critic's judgments demonstrate a recurring tendency to exceed the accepted standards of hadith criticism or to reject narrators on grounds that other qualified critics regard as insufficient.

The Concept of Leniency

Linguistically, the Arabic term *sahl* denotes ease, gentleness, and the absence of harshness or difficulty. It is the opposite of roughness and severity. The derivative *tashīl* conveys the meaning of making something easy or facilitating it, while *tasāhul* refers to leniency or excessive ease in dealing with a matter (Ibn Manẓūr, 1955).

In the context of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*, leniency may be understood as a failure to apply the established principles and methodological guidelines for evaluating the reliability of hadith narrators with sufficient rigour. A lenient critic may accept a narrator or a narration despite weaknesses or reservations that, under standards generally recognised by hadith critics, would require greater scrutiny or prevent such acceptance.

Leniency therefore represents the opposite methodological tendency to excessive strictness. Whereas the strict critic may impose unnecessarily demanding standards and reject narrators for relatively minor shortcomings, the lenient critic may lower the threshold of acceptance and authenticate narrators despite evidence that would normally warrant caution or rejection. In this regard, *tasāhul* involves an excessive degree of ease in applying the principles of *jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*.

Methodologically, both extremes are problematic. Strictness becomes excessive when a critic goes beyond the established principles of criticism. At the same time, leniency becomes excessive when a critic applies those principles too loosely or adopts standards significantly less stringent than those generally recognised by the majority of hadith scholars. The balanced approach lies between these two extremes: applying the principles of *jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* consistently, proportionately, and in accordance with the established standards of hadith criticism.

Accordingly, describing a particular hadith critic as *mutashaddid* or *mutasāhil* should not be based merely on isolated judgments that differ from those of other scholars. Rather, such a characterisation requires a systematic examination of the critic's overall methodology, including the number and nature of his judgments, the reasons underlying his *jarḥ* and *ta'dīl*, his treatment of disputed narrators, and the extent to which his judgments correspond to or diverge from those of other recognised hadith critics. This methodological consideration is essential to ensure that the labels of strictness and leniency are applied objectively rather than becoming generalised descriptions based on limited evidence.

The Ranks of Hadith Critics and the Most Notable Scholars Characterised as Strict, Lenient, or Moderate

A reading of the classical literature on hadith criticism, particularly works devoted to the biographies and evaluations of narrators, reveals numerous statements in which leading scholars of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* are characterised as strict, lenient, or moderate in their assessment of narrators. These descriptions show that major hadith critics did not necessarily apply identical standards when evaluating the reliability or weakness of transmitters. Rather, methodological orientations differed among them, and these differences must be taken into account when interpreting their critical judgments.

One early example of this characterisation is attributed to 'Alī ibn al-Madīnī (d. 234 AH), who described Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd al-Qaṭṭān as strict in his criticism. He reportedly stated that when Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Maḥdī agreed in excluding a narrator, he would accept their position; however, when they differed, he preferred the judgment of 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Maḥdī because the latter was more moderate, whereas Yaḥyā was characterised by strictness (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, 1984).

This statement is methodologically significant because it shows that characterising a hadith critic as strict or moderate was not merely a subjective description. Rather, it rested on a comparative assessment of different critics' practices. 'Alī ibn al-Madīnī was able to identify a methodological distinction between Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Maḥdī precisely because he was familiar with their respective approaches to narrator criticism. This suggests that determining whether a critic is strict, lenient, or moderate requires examining his overall critical methodology and comparing it with the methodologies of other recognised authorities.

The same principle appears in the statement attributed to Imām al-Nasā'ī (d. 303 AH). He is reported to have indicated that he would not reject a narrator unless the scholars generally agreed on his rejection. He gave the example of a narrator whom Ibn al-Maḥdī considered trustworthy. In contrast, Yaḥyā al-Qaṭṭān considered weak, explaining that he would not

reject the narrator because Yaḥyā was known for his strictness in criticism (Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, 1984). This statement further demonstrates that the judgment of a narrator cannot always be understood independently of the methodological tendency of the critic who issued it.

Al-Dhahabī's Classification of Hadith Critics

Among the classical scholars who discussed differences in the methodological tendencies of hadith critics most explicitly was Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748 AH). His discussion provides an important framework for understanding the categories of strict, moderate, and lenient critics. According to al-Dhahabī, critics of narrators can be broadly differentiated by the degree of severity they exercise in *al-jarḥ wa al-taʿdīl*. He identifies some critics as strict, others as lenient, and others as occupying a middle and balanced position (al-Dhahabī, 1990).

According to al-Dhahabī, a strict critic may weaken a narrator based on a small number of mistakes or relatively minor shortcomings. For this reason, when such a critic declares a narrator trustworthy, considerable weight may be attached to his authentication because he is known to exercise caution in granting *taʿdīl*. However, when he declares a narrator weak, his judgment should be examined in light of the assessments of other specialists. If other authoritative critics agree with his criticism and no recognised scholar has authenticated the narrator, the judgment of weakness becomes stronger. If, however, another qualified critic has authenticated the narrator, the matter requires further investigation, particularly when the criticism is unexplained. In such cases, the hadith may remain within the sphere of consideration as *ḥasan* rather than being immediately classified as weak (al-Dhahabī, 1990).

Al-Dhahabī identifies Ibn Maʿīn, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, and al-Jūzajānī among the critics characterised by greater strictness. In contrast, he mentions Abū ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥākim, and Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī among those regarded as more lenient. Between these two tendencies, he places scholars such as al-Bukhārī, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Abū Zurʿah al-Rāzī, and Ibn ʿAdī as comparatively moderate and balanced in their critical judgments (al-Dhahabī, 1990).

This classification matters not because it establishes rigid categories that apply mechanically to every judgment these scholars issue, but because it highlights differences in critical thresholds. A critic's characterisation as strict or lenient should therefore function as a methodological consideration when evaluating his individual judgments rather than as a substitute for examining the evidence underlying those judgments.

The Importance of Preserving the Exact Wording of Critical Judgments

Al-Dhahabī also emphasised the importance of transmitting the statements of hadith critics accurately and without alteration. He noted that the critics differed in their degrees of severity and moderation, mentioning Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd, Ibn Maʿīn, Abū Ḥātim, and Ibn Khirāsh among the stricter critics; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, al-Bukhārī, and Abū Zurʿah among the moderate critics; and al-Tirmidhī, al-Ḥākim, and, at times, al-Dāraquṭnī among the more lenient critics (al-Dhahabī, 1992).

This observation extends beyond the classification itself. It indicates that the wording of a *jarh* or *ta'dīl* statement should be preserved as transmitted and interpreted within its methodological context. Altering, isolating, or generalising a critic's statement may distort an understanding of his actual position. The researcher must therefore distinguish between the literal wording of a judgment and its methodological implications when considered alongside the critic's broader body of work.

Al-Dhahabī further recognises that differences among critics do not necessarily imply that one of them must be deliberately mistaken or that the science of hadith criticism is inherently inconsistent. Rather, scholars may reach different conclusions because they assess the same evidence with different degrees of knowledge, scrutiny, and methodological judgment. Their disagreements may therefore concern the degree of strength or weakness rather than necessarily constituting an absolute contradiction (al-Dhahabī, 1992).

Methodological Implications of the Classification

The classification of hadith critics into strict, moderate, and lenient categories has several important implications for studying *al-jarh wa al-ta'dīl*. First, a critic's judgment should not be examined in isolation from his established methodological tendencies. Second, the characterisation of a critic as strict or lenient should itself be based on systematic evidence rather than on one or two isolated judgments. Third, differences between critics should be investigated through comparison and induction in order to determine whether they reflect a consistent methodological tendency.

Accordingly, when a strict critic declares a narrator weak while another critic authenticates him, the disagreement should not be resolved merely by selecting one statement over the other. Instead, the researcher should examine the reasons for the *jarh*, determine whether the criticism is explained or unexplained, assess the narrator's reliability according to other authorities, and consider each critic's methodological position. The same principle applies to a critic characterised as lenient: his authentication should not be rejected automatically, but it may require corroboration and comparison with the judgments of other specialists.

This approach demonstrates that *al-jarh wa al-ta'dīl* is not merely a process of collecting isolated statements about narrators. It is an interpretive and evaluative discipline that requires induction (*istiqrā'*), investigation, comparison, contextual analysis, and the weighing of evidence. The critic's methodological profile is therefore an important factor in determining how to understand his individual judgments.

Finally, describing a particular scholar as strict, lenient, or moderate should never be understood as diminishing his scholarly status or authority. These descriptions are methodological classifications intended to help researchers interpret critical judgments accurately. They safeguard against applying a scholar's statements mechanically without considering the circumstances, evidence, and methodological principles underlying them. Consequently, using these classifications appropriately does not undermine the authority of classical critics; rather, it contributes to a more nuanced and academically responsible understanding of their contributions to the science of hadith criticism.

Strictness and Leniency: Between Relativism and Consistency

Describing a hadith critic as *strict* or *lenient* should not be understood as an absolute or immutable characteristic. Such a description may overlook the practical and applied dimensions of the methodology of the imams of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*, as reflected in their books, statements, and individual judgments concerning narrators. Rather, strictness and leniency are relative and general descriptions that refer to the methodological tendency adopted by a critic when evaluating narrators through *jarḥ* and *ta'dīl*. Accordingly, there is no absolute rule requiring a critic to apply the same degree of strictness or leniency in every individual judgment. The actual practice of the hadith critics demonstrates considerable variation in their evaluations.

The following examples show that describing a critic as strict or lenient is fundamentally a relative methodological characterisation rather than an absolute, consistent principle applicable to every case.

Critics Described as Strict May Sometimes Declare Trustworthy Narrators Whom Other Critics Weaken

An example appears in the biographical account of Ghālib ibn Khaṭṭāb Abū Sulaymān al-Baṣrī al-Qaṭṭān. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nasā'ī, and Abū Ḥātim considered him trustworthy, whereas Ibn 'Adī criticised him, stating that weakness was evident in his *ḥadīth*. (al-Mizzī, 1980; Ibn 'Adī al-Jurjānī, 1997).

This example demonstrates that a critic's general classification as *mutashaddid* (strict) does not mean that he will necessarily weaken every narrator whom another critic considers problematic. Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn and al-Nasā'ī regarded Ghālib al-Qaṭṭān as trustworthy, and both are commonly characterised as among the more stringent critics. At the same time, Ibn 'Adī, who is generally characterised as more lenient in his assessment of narrators, criticised him.

If strictness and leniency were fixed characteristics that governed every individual judgment, one might reasonably expect a strict critic to criticise a narrator whom another critic weakened and a lenient critic to accept that narrator. The actual evidence, however, demonstrates the opposite. This indicates that such classifications describe a critic's general methodological tendency, rather than determining the outcome of every individual evaluation.

Critics Described as Lenient May Criticise Narrators Whom Strict or Moderate Critics Consider Trustworthy

A similar phenomenon appears in the biography of 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Sulaymān ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Ḥanzalah. He was considered trustworthy by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn, Abū Zur'ah, al-Nasā'ī, and al-Dāraquṭnī, and his *ḥadīth* was also narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Nevertheless, Ibn Ḥibbān criticised him, stating that he was among those who committed many mistakes and errors (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, 1952).

This case further indicates that the labels *strict* and *lenient* cannot be applied mechanically to individual judgments. Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn and al-Nasā'ī, who are generally regarded as strict

critics, declared the narrator trustworthy. In contrast, Ibn Ḥibbān, who is commonly characterised as relatively lenient, expressed criticism of him.

If strictness and leniency functioned as rigid principles governing all judgments, the expected pattern would be the reverse: the strict critics would have been expected to weaken the narrator. In contrast, the lenient critic would have been expected to accept him. The historical evidence does not conform to such a pattern. Therefore, the evaluation of a narrator must be understood in relation to the specific evidence and methodological considerations underlying each critic's judgment, rather than inferred solely from his general classification as strict or lenient.

The Major Imams Narrated from Narrators Whose Reliability Was Disputed

Another important indication appears in the practice of the major hadith imams, particularly al-Bukhārī and Muslim, who narrated from certain narrators whose reliability was subject to scholarly disagreement. For example, al-Bukhārī narrated from Bayān ibn 'Amr al-Bukhārī, concerning whom Abū Ḥātim reportedly stated that he was *majhūl* (unknown). Similar examples also appear in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim. The question therefore arises: should such practices be interpreted as evidence of leniency on the part of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, or should they instead be understood in light of their particular methodological principles and *ijtihād*?

This issue becomes even more significant when considering the practice of Imām al-Nasā'ī, whose strictness in the evaluation of narrators is widely recognised among hadith scholars. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī observed that Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī included ḥadīth from narrators. However, al-Nasā'ī deliberately avoided narrating from them, including some narrators whose reports were found in the two *Ṣaḥīḥs* (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, 1984).

Nevertheless, despite al-Nasā'ī's well-known strictness, he included in his *Sunan* reports transmitted by certain narrators whose reliability had been criticised. Among them was al-Ḥārith ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Hamadānī al-A'war (al-'Uqaylī, 1984). Al-Dhahabī commented on this in his biographical assessment, noting that despite al-Nasā'ī's strictness toward narrators, he cited al-Ḥārith's reports as evidence and regarded his status more favourably, whereas most critics weakened him. Al-Dhahabī also noted that although al-Sha'bī accused al-Ḥārith of lying, he nevertheless transmitted from him, suggesting that his weakness may have concerned his statements and anecdotes rather than his transmission of Prophetic *ḥadīth*, while acknowledging his considerable knowledge (al-Dhahabī, 1963).

This example raises an important methodological question: Should al-Nasā'ī be characterised as lenient merely because he accepted or transmitted from a narrator whom other critics weakened, despite his established reputation for strictness? The more appropriate interpretation is that his judgment should be examined within the context of his specific methodological reasoning and assessment of the narrator, rather than being determined by the general label of *mutashaddid*. Thus, an apparently lenient judgment does not necessarily contradict a critic's overall reputation for strictness.

Divergent Judgments by a Single Critic Concerning the Same Narrator

A further indication of the relative nature of strictness and leniency is found in cases where a single critic gives different judgments concerning the same narrator, whether through criticism (*jarḥ*) or commendation (*ta'dīl*). Such variation, when authentically established, should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of confusion, inconsistency, or error on the part of the critic. Rather, it may represent a natural consequence of the methodological complexity involved in evaluating narrators. In this respect, hadith critics can be compared to jurists who may reach different rulings on the same jurisprudential issue based on different evidence, circumstances, or interpretive considerations.

Imām al-Tirmidhī (d. 279 AH) stated: “The imams among the scholars have differed regarding the weakening of narrators, just as they have differed in other areas of knowledge.” (al-Tirmidhī, 1975).

Nevertheless, not every apparent difference in the judgment of a single critic concerning the same narrator should automatically be regarded as a genuine contradiction. In some cases, the apparent discrepancy may be superficial rather than substantive. A careful examination of the critic's terminology, intended meaning, and the circumstances and context in which each judgment was issued may demonstrate that the two statements address different aspects of the narrator's status. Therefore, apparent inconsistencies in hadith critics' statements should be approached through contextual and methodological analysis. The researcher should examine the precise wording of each judgment, the circumstances surrounding it, the type of criticism or commendation intended, and the evidence upon which the judgment was based. Through such an approach, many apparent contradictions may be reconciled, revealing that the critic's methodology was more nuanced than the general labels of *strictness* or *leniency* might suggest.

The Impact of Describing a Critic as Strict or Lenient on the Acceptance of His Judgments

Describing a hadith critic as *strict* or *lenient* does not, in itself, invalidate his judgments. A critic's *jarḥ* cannot be entirely disregarded merely because he is characterised as strict, just as his *ta'dīl* cannot be dismissed merely because he is regarded as lenient. Likewise, the judgments of a critic described as moderate and balanced should not be accepted unconditionally solely based on that characterisation. Rather, these descriptions serve primarily as methodological indicators to be considered when evaluating conflicting judgments of criticism and commendation (Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Jawābī, n.d.).

This principle rests on the recognition that hadith critics are human beings who may exercise different degrees of strictness or leniency according to the circumstances, evidence, and methodological considerations surrounding each case. A critic may therefore adopt a stringent position in one case while taking a more accommodating position in another. Consequently, the general characterisation of a critic as strict or lenient should not be treated as an independent basis for accepting or rejecting his judgment.

Nevertheless, when a strict critic is the sole authority to issue a criticism, and another reliable assessment does not contradict his judgment, his criticism may carry significant weight. It should not be disregarded merely because of his reputation for strictness. Conversely, the judgment of a critic known for leniency requires careful consideration, particularly when it

stands alone and is contradicted by stronger critical evidence. Similarly, where a moderate critic opposes the judgments of both a strict and a lenient critic, his assessment cannot automatically be preferred unless the methodological or evidentiary basis of his judgment is demonstrably stronger. The decisive factor, therefore, is not the label attached to the critic, but the strength, clarity, and methodological basis of the evidence underlying the judgment.

Al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Dhahabī emphasised that the leading authorities of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* were not infallible, although they were among the most accurate, impartial, and least prone to error in this field. He stressed the importance of collective agreement among the major critics and cautioned against disregarding their established judgments without sufficient grounds (al-Dhahabī, 1981). This principle is further supported by Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mu'allimī al-Yamānī, who cautioned against treating strictness and leniency as permanent characteristics of individual imams. He explained that a critic may be lenient in some circumstances and strict in others, and that understanding these characteristics requires a comprehensive examination of the critic's judgments together with careful reflection on the circumstances surrounding them (al-Shawkānī, 1980).

Accordingly, the characterisation of a critic as strict or lenient should function as a contextual interpretive tool rather than a criterion for the automatic acceptance or rejection of his judgments. The following points further demonstrate that describing a critic as strict or lenient does not invalidate his judgments altogether.

Strictness and Leniency Reflect Methodological Differences Rather Than Personal Whim

The differences in strictness or leniency among hadith critics were not necessarily the result of personal preference or arbitrary judgment. Rather, they frequently arose from differences in their methodological approaches to evaluating narrators and hadith reports. Each critic may have adopted particular criteria for determining the reliability of a narrator, the acceptance of his transmission, or the validity of criticism directed against him. Some critics established stringent standards for both *jarḥ* and *ta'dīl*, whereas others adopted comparatively less restrictive standards. Others may have been strict in matters of criticism but relatively accommodating in authentication, or conversely, strict in authentication while more cautious in issuing criticism.

Al-Mu'allimī al-Yamānī highlighted this methodological dimension by explaining that some hadith critics would not authenticate a narrator until they had examined a substantial number of his sound reports and became convinced that soundness was a stable characteristic of his transmission. This indicates that the basis of their judgments in both authentication and criticism was closely connected to empirical examination of the narrator's hadith corpus, rather than to a predetermined personal inclination toward strictness or leniency (al-Mu'allimī, 1980). Therefore, when evaluating the judgment of a critic characterised as strict or lenient, it is necessary to examine the methodological criteria employed by that critic, rather than relying exclusively on his general classification.

Hadith Scholars Accepted and Utilised the Judgments of Critics Characterised as Strict or Lenient

The historical practice of hadith scholarship further demonstrates that scholars did not simply disregard the judgments of critics because they were known for strictness or leniency. Rather,

their judgments were examined, transmitted, compared, and, where appropriate, acted upon. An example is the judgment of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nasā’ī (d. 303 AH) concerning al-Ḥārith al-A‘war, as discussed above. Despite al-Nasā’ī’s established reputation for strictness in the evaluation of narrators, his assessment of al-Ḥārith was taken seriously. Al-Dhahabī explicitly noted that, despite al-Nasā’ī’s strictness, he cited the reports of al-Ḥārith as evidence and strengthened his status, whereas the majority of critics weakened him (al-Dhahabī, 1963).

This example demonstrates that al-Nasā’ī’s reputation for strictness did not constitute a reason for rejecting his judgment. Rather, his specific assessment was considered on its own methodological and evidentiary basis. A similar example appears in the biography of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Wahb, the renowned hadith scholar of Egypt. Al-Dhahabī described Ibn Wahb as a highly authoritative transmitter and noted the abundance of his hadiths in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* and other major hadith collections. He then cited al-Nasā’ī’s assessment of Ibn Wahb: “Ibn Wahb is trustworthy; to my knowledge, he has never narrated a rejected hadith from trustworthy narrators.” (al-Dhahabī, 1981).

The significance of this example lies in the fact that al-Dhahabī explicitly mentioned al-Nasā’ī’s strictness in criticism while simultaneously presenting his positive judgment of Ibn Wahb as a reliable assessment. Thus, al-Nasā’ī’s strictness did not prevent his authentication from being accepted or relied upon. These examples demonstrate that the methodological label attached to a critic should not overshadow the substantive content of his judgment. A critic known for strictness may issue a sound *ta’dīl*, just as a critic known for leniency may issue a valid *jarḥ*. The critical judgment must therefore be examined according to its evidentiary basis, methodological context, corroborating assessments, and the specific circumstances of the narrator under consideration.

Criteria to Be Considered Before Describing a Critic as Strict or Lenient

Before characterising a hadith critic as *strict* (*mutashaddid*) or *lenient* (*mutasāhil*), several methodological considerations must be taken into account. Such classifications should not be based merely on isolated statements or selected judgments, because the apparent strictness or leniency of a critic may arise from particular circumstances, methodological preferences, doctrinal considerations, or the subject matter of the hadith under evaluation.

Accordingly, a comprehensive assessment of a critic requires an examination of his judgments as a whole, together with the circumstances and methodological principles underlying those judgments. The following factors are particularly important.

Peer Criticism May Be Influenced by Envy, Rivalry, or Personal Disagreement

One of the most important considerations is the possibility that a critic’s assessment of a contemporary or peer may have been influenced by personal rivalry, disagreement, envy, or other forms of interpersonal tension. Therefore, a critic should not automatically be characterised as strict merely because he issued severe criticism against another scholar who was his contemporary. It is possible that his treatment of his peers differed from his treatment of narrators outside his immediate scholarly circle.

For this reason, many hadith scholars exercised caution concerning statements made by contemporaries about one another, particularly when such statements appeared to be motivated by partisanship, personal hostility, or envy and were not supported by clear evidence. Al-Dhahabī emphasised that statements made by contemporaries about one another should be treated cautiously and, where personal bias or tribal partisanship is evident, should not be relied upon as grounds for criticism (al-Dhahabī, 1992, 1981). He likewise advised scholars to seek corroborating evidence before relying upon such statements.

This principle, however, does not mean that scholars should reject all peer criticism. On the contrary, criticism from a contemporary may sometimes be particularly valuable because contemporaneity provides greater opportunity for direct observation and familiarity with the narrator's conduct and transmission. If the critic identifies a specific and demonstrable reason for his criticism and provides supporting evidence, his judgment may be accepted and acted upon. Conversely, when the criticism is unexplained and a personal dispute between the two scholars is established, considerable caution is required. A notable example is Aḥmad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Miṣrī. Al-Dhahabī reported al-Nasā'ī's severe criticism of him, including the statement that he was not trustworthy. However, al-Dhahabī subsequently explained that the criticism was connected to an earlier disagreement between al-Nasā'ī and Aḥmad ibn Ṣāliḥ. He therefore did not treat al-Nasā'ī's statement as sufficient evidence of a general methodological tendency toward strictness.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī likewise reported that the other major imams relied upon the hadith of Aḥmad ibn Ṣāliḥ, whereas al-Nasā'ī refrained from narrating from him. He attributed the deterioration in their relationship to personal circumstances surrounding their interactions. Thus, this example demonstrates that a severe judgment against a particular narrator cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence that the critic was methodologically strict. The circumstances surrounding the judgment must first be examined.

Doctrinal Differences May Affect the Apparent Strictness or Leniency of a Critic

Another factor to consider is doctrinal or theological disagreement. A critic may express particularly severe criticism of a narrator or scholar because of differences in creed or scholarly affiliation. Such criticism should not automatically establish that the critic was generally strict in his methodology of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*. Al-Dhahabī drew attention to this issue by observing that an imam's position toward his teacher or toward matters consistent with his own *madhhab* may differ from his position in matters where disagreement exists (al-Dhahabī, 1980).

A relevant example is the dispute between Abū Nu'aym and Ibn Mandah. Both scholars engaged in severe criticism of one another. After citing Abū Nu'aym's criticism of Ibn Mandah, al-Dhahabī cautioned readers against relying upon such statements because of the hostility between the two scholars. At the same time, he affirmed the reliability of both scholars in their own right and did not allow their mutual criticism to undermine their status as transmitters.

Al-Dhahabī further explained that Ibn Mandah's severe criticism of Abū Nu'aym was connected to a theological disagreement, while Abū Nu'aym likewise criticised Ibn Mandah.

He consequently regarded the statements of rival contemporaries as inherently requiring caution. This example demonstrates that theological disagreement may produce unusually severe criticism without necessarily indicating that the critic was generally strict in the technical sense of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*. Therefore, researchers must distinguish between criticism arising from methodological evaluation of a narrator's reliability and criticism arising primarily from doctrinal or personal disagreement.

The Subject Matter of the Hadith May Influence the Degree of Strictness

The apparent strictness or leniency of a critic may also vary according to the subject matter of the hadith under consideration. Some hadith critics adopted particularly stringent standards for reports relating to lawful and unlawful matters (*al-ḥalāl wa al-ḥarām*), while demonstrating greater flexibility with respect to reports concerning virtues of deeds (*faḍā'il al-a'māl*), exhortation, and encouragement.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī reported that some early scholars maintained that hadith concerning matters of lawfulness and unlawfulness should be transmitted only from narrators free from significant grounds for suspicion. By contrast, greater latitude was permitted in transmitting reports concerning encouragement, exhortation, and similar subjects (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, 1980).

He further explained that narrators transmitting reports establishing legal distinctions between the lawful and unlawful were expected to exercise particular caution and to transmit only from scholars characterised by knowledge, strong memory, precision, and expertise. Reports concerning virtues of deeds, however, were treated with comparatively greater flexibility.

Consequently, a critic who appears strict in one category of hadith and more lenient in another should not necessarily be classified as inconsistent. His different judgments may reflect different evidentiary thresholds associated with different subject matters. This supports the broader argument that strictness and leniency are relative methodological descriptions. They may characterise a critic's general tendency, but they do not necessarily apply uniformly across every category of hadith.

A Critic's Position toward Innovators May Affect the Perception of His Strictness or Leniency

Another factor concerns the critic's approach toward narrators associated with deviant theological positions or religious innovations. A critic may be perceived as particularly strict because of his severe condemnation of innovators, while at the same time accepting or transmitting their hadith. An example is found in the biography of Ḥammād ibn Salamah, where al-Dhahabī transmitted a statement attributed to Imām Aḥmad indicating the exceptional strictness with which Ḥammād ibn Salamah dealt with innovators (al-Dhahabī, 1980).

This raises an important methodological distinction. Strictness toward theological innovation should not automatically be equated with strictness in narrator criticism generally. A scholar may adopt an uncompromising position concerning doctrinal deviation while applying a different set of criteria when evaluating the reliability of a narrator's transmission. Therefore, when assessing whether a critic is *mutashaddid* or *mutasāhil*, researchers should identify the

specific dimension in which the critic demonstrates strictness or leniency. Otherwise, a particular stance on innovation may be incorrectly generalised to the entirety of his methodology.

The Characterisation of a Critic May Be Specific to a Particular Book or Scholarly Context

A final consideration is that a scholar's reputation for strictness or leniency may relate specifically to a particular book or area of scholarly activity, rather than to his entire intellectual output. A prominent example is Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī. He is frequently described by later scholars as lenient, particularly in matters of hadith authentication. However, closer examination indicates that this characterisation is principally associated with his judgments in *al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*. It should not automatically be extended to all his writings or to his judgments concerning narrators in the field of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī noted that criticism was directed at al-Ḥākim primarily because of the hadiths that he included in *al-Mustadrak* and considered to conform to the criteria of al-Bukhārī and Muslim (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, 1984). Ibn Taymiyyah similarly characterised al-Ḥākim as relatively lenient in authentication and regarded his standards as lower than those of several major hadith authorities. He particularly criticised some of his authentication judgments in *al-Mustadrak* (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995).

The methodological distinction becomes even clearer in the statement attributed to al-Mu'allimī. He argued that the problem with al-Ḥākim was not fundamentally his transmission of hadith, since he transmitted reports from reliable sources, but rather some of his judgments concerning the status and authenticity of those reports in *al-Mustadrak*. Importantly, al-Mu'allimī maintained that the criticism directed toward al-Ḥākim in *al-Mustadrak* should not automatically be extended to his other writings, particularly his works on narrator criticism and evaluation.

This distinction is highly significant. It demonstrates that a scholarly characterisation such as *mutasāhil* may be domain-specific rather than universal. A critic may be lenient in authenticating hadith in one particular work while demonstrating a sound and comparatively rigorous methodology in his treatment of narrators elsewhere.

Conclusion

Based on the preceding discussion of the methodological guidelines that should be observed before characterising the imams of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* as strict or lenient, several conclusions can be drawn from this study.

1. The question of whether a hadith critic is strict or lenient constitutes an important consideration in the evaluation of narrators through *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*. Awareness of a critic's methodological tendency is particularly relevant when assessing and reconciling apparently conflicting judgments concerning the reliability of narrators.
2. Characterising a hadith critic as strict or lenient is a significant and sensitive matter. Such a characterisation may undermine confidence in the critic and, in some cases, lead to the wholesale rejection of his judgments. Therefore, considerable caution is required, and the

underlying motives, circumstances, and methodological reasons must be carefully investigated before assigning such a characterisation to a leading authority in hadith criticism.

3. The discussion of strictness and leniency among the imams of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl* has a long history in hadith scholarship. A careful examination of the hadith literature, particularly biographical and narrator-critical works, reveals numerous statements classifying critics as strict, lenient, or moderate.

4. Among the earliest scholars to explicitly characterise hadith critics in terms of strictness and leniency was 'Alī ibn al-Madīnī, followed by Imām al-Nasā'ī. The issue subsequently received particularly extensive attention from al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Dhahabī, who discussed it in considerable detail and addressed it from various perspectives throughout his writings.

5. Al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Dhahabī broadly classified hadith critics into three categories according to their methodological tendencies: strict, moderate, and lenient. His classification provides valuable insight into the comparative methodology of the critics and constitutes an important contribution to understanding their evaluative approaches. Nevertheless, some of his characterisations of particular scholars may require further examination and should not necessarily be regarded as definitive.

6. The characterisation of a critic as strict or lenient is not absolute or uniformly applicable to all of his judgments. Rather, it is a relative methodological description that may apply to a critic in many cases while not necessarily applying in others.

7. Substantial textual and contextual evidence demonstrates the relative nature of strictness and leniency among hadith critics. This includes cases generally characterised as strict authenticated narrators who criticised critics characterised as lenient, and critics characterised as lenient who criticised narrators accepted by stricter authorities. It also includes instances in which a single critic expressed different judgments concerning the same narrator, alternating between *jarḥ* and *ta'dīl*. Such examples demonstrate that these classifications cannot be applied mechanically to individual judgments.

8. Characterising a critic as strict or lenient does not entail the wholesale invalidation of his judgments. A *jarḥ* issued by a strict critic cannot simply be disregarded because of his strictness, just as a *ta'dīl* issued by a lenient critic cannot automatically be dismissed because of his general tendency. Similarly, the judgments of a critic characterised as moderate should not be accepted unconditionally merely because he is considered balanced. Rather, each judgment must be examined according to its evidentiary and methodological basis.

9. The apparent strictness of the hadith critics in certain judgments did not necessarily arise from personal preference or arbitrary bias. In many cases, it resulted from differences in their methodological principles and criteria for evaluating narrators and hadith reports. These differences may concern the standards adopted for authentication, criticism, narrator reliability, or the assessment of particular types of reports.

10. Although certain hadith critics were characterised as strict or lenient, later scholars did not consequently disregard all of their judgments. On the contrary, their evaluations

continued to be transmitted, examined, accepted, and relied upon in determining the reliability or weakness of numerous narrators. This demonstrates that the labels of strictness and leniency did not function as grounds for the wholesale rejection of a critic's scholarly authority.

11. Several considerations and circumstances must be examined before characterising a critic as strict or lenient. These may include personal rivalry, envy, sectarian or doctrinal bias, disagreement among contemporaries, and other contextual factors. Where it can be demonstrated that a particular criticism arose primarily from such factors and lacks adequate methodological or evidentiary support, it should be treated with caution and, where appropriate, disregarded.

12. The apparent strictness or leniency of hadith critics may arise from a variety of methodological considerations. These include their approaches to narrations concerning matters of the lawful and unlawful, their treatment of reports transmitted by individuals associated with theological innovations or personal inclinations, and the specific methodological principles governing their scholarly works. Consequently, strictness and leniency should be understood within the particular methodological context in which a critic's judgment was formulated, rather than as permanent characteristics applicable to all of his scholarly assessments.

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