

Al-Kulaynī: Insights into His Life and Methodology

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Abstract

Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941) is considered one of the most influential scholars in Twelver Shī‘ism, with his magnum opus, *al-Kāfī*, considered to be the premiere work of *ḥadīth* and one of the main sources for theological doctrine (*‘aqīda*) and practical jurisprudence (*fiqh*) among Twelver Shī‘is. Despite the recognition that al-Kulaynī’s work has achieved in Shī‘ī discourse, unfortunately, not much is known about his life, motivations, and approach, especially in the English-speaking Shī‘ī world. This paper seeks to correct this by introducing the individual and his methodology. The paper combines a close reading of the available historical details of his life, together with an analysis of the relevant sections from the author’s *muqaddima* (preface), wherein one would expect to find answers to such questions.¹

Keywords: Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, *ḥadīth*, *‘ilm al-rijāl*, *maqūla* of ‘Umar b. Ḥanzāla, *takhyīr*.

1. Biographical Elements

Details about the life of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb b. Iṣḥāq al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī (d. 328/940 or 329/941) are scant.² Incidental details

¹ A proper treatment of the contents of *al-Kāfī*, including al-Kulaynī’s organisation/arrangement of the material and the few authorial remarks he makes therein are beyond the scope of the current paper.

² Shī‘ī *ḥadīth* studies in Western academia is still in its infancy. There exists

are known, such as the fact that he was one-eyed (*aʿwar*),³ but others are not, such as the year of his birth.⁴ What can be gleaned from the geographical descriptor (*nisba*) attached to his name is that his ancestral home was Kulayn (he may have even been born there), a small village in the district of Rayy (to be found within present-day Tehran).⁵

A major influence on al-Kulaynī would have been the scholarly

no monograph dedicated to al-Kulaynī's life nor a study of *al-Kāfi*. A notable contribution is by Andrew J. Newman who touches upon the life and methodology of al-Kulaynī in his published work which will be cited where necessary; see Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shīʿism: Ḥadīth as Discourse between Qum and Baghdad* (Routledge: 2000), Chapter 6. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Hasan Ansari are aware of this lacuna stating: "aside from a few rare or brief articles devoted to our author/compiler or to particular aspects of his work, no monograph synthesis, carried out in accord with historical and critical perspectives, has yet been accorded to this great scholar and to the milieu in which his magnum opus first saw the light." Their self-described "modest" attempt at filling this gap is very good at setting the historical background of al-Kulaynī's life, and describing the different intellectual currents of his age, but does not dissect his methodology in any detail (the *muqaddima* is mentioned in passing but not quoted from even once!); see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Hasan Ansari, "Perfecting a Religion: Remarks on al-Kulaynī and His Summa of Traditions," in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Silent Qurʾān and the Speaking Qurʾān: Scriptural Sources of Islam between History and Fervor* (Columbia University Press: 2016).

³ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, ed. Jawād al-Qayyūmī (Muʿassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī: 2009), 439.

⁴ Considering that al-Kulaynī dies in 329/941 and taking an estimated average life-time of 70 years or so means that he was born around 260/872, the date in which the *ghayba al-ṣuḡhrā* (lesser occultation) of the twelfth Imam is supposed to have begun.

⁵ For more informed speculation about the village of Kulayn and where it is located within Rayy, see Amir-Moezzi and Ansari, "Perfecting a Religion," 138.

pedigree of his immediate family. The early Imāmī bibliographer, al-Najāshī (d. 450/1058), notes that al-Kulaynī's maternal uncle, 'Allān al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī, was a trustworthy (*thiqa*) narrator of *ḥadīth* and notable figure (*ʿayn*).⁶

Beyond this, all information or details about al-Kulaynī's life must be inferred on the back of his magnum opus, *al-Kāfi*, upon which his legacy rests. The book, when studied closely and looking especially at the names of his direct authorities in the chains (*asānīd*), tells the story of a long and arduous journey for the sake of acquiring *ḥadīth*.⁷

Al-Kulaynī must have taken the first real steps towards his education in his native Rayy, as was typical for any budding *ḥadīth* scholar.⁸ al-Kulaynī would then have gone to Qom, which is closest to Rayy, and by this time, a prominent centre for Shīʿī *fiqh*, *ḥadīth* and general

⁶ Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, ed. Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī (Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī: 1997), 206.

⁷ In the present work, al-Kulaynī's itinerary has been reconstructed from the proposal of the contemporary Iranian researcher Muḥammad Bāqir al-Bahbūdī with slight modifications; see the introduction in al-Bahbūdī, *Ṣaḥīḥ man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh* (Mu'assasat al-Wafā: 1987).

⁸ Apart from his uncle, the aforementioned 'Allān al-Kulaynī, whose full name is 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Abān, al-Kulaynī's other known teacher in Rayy is one Muḥammad b. 'Aqīl al-Kulaynī. It is the opinion of the author of the present work that a third known teacher should be added. In criticism of the proposal of al-Bahbūdī, al-Kulaynī should be considered to have met up with Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. Muḥammad b. 'Awn al-Asadī (d. 312/924) in Rayy and not Kufa. This is because al-Asadī had already relocated to Rayy from Kufa sometime before the year 290/902-903; see al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba* (Mu'assasat al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmiyya: 2004), 415. All three men transmit to al-Kulaynī the famous works of the controversial narrator Sahl b. Ziyād al-Ādamī who had fled to Rayy after being chased out of Qom under the accusation of *ghuluww*; see al-Ḥasan b. Yūsuf Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *Khulāṣat al-aqwāl fī ma'rifat al-rijāl*, ed. Jawād al-Qayyūmī (Mu'assasat Nashr al-Faqāha: 2010), 430.

scholarship. The importance of this trip can be glimpsed by the fact that most of the *ḥadīth* that al-Kulaynī would come to include in *al-Kāfi* are on the authority of his Qummī *mashāyikh* (teachers), with his most prominent *shaykh*, ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim (alive in 307/919-920), occurring in the chains of almost a third of the more than 16,000 *ḥadīth* found in *al-Kāfi*.⁹

A stay in Naysābūr would have followed¹⁰ before setting out for Kufa,¹¹ the ancient seat of Imāmī Shī‘ism and the epicentre of its earliest proponents. We know that al-Kulaynī journeyed even further west after leaving Iraq, with his travels possibly culminating in Damascus, Syria.

The Sunnī scholar Ibn ‘Asākir’s (d. 571/1176) massive *Ta’rīkh Madīnat Dimashq* contains profiles of thousands of personalities who were resident in Damascus or happened to pass through the town and its surrounding environs. He has an entry for al-Kulaynī in which he says:¹²

مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ، وَيُقَالُ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ، أَبُو جَعْفَرٍ الْكُلَيْنِيُّ، مِنْ شُيُوخِ
الرَّافِضَةِ، قَدِمَ دِمَشْقَ، وَحَدَّثَ بِبَغْلَبَكٍ ...

⁹ Apart from ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm, al-Kulaynī’s three other Qummī teachers: Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-‘Atṭār, Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Ash‘arī (d. 306/918), and al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ash‘arī, account together for almost another third of the contents of *al-Kāfi*.

¹⁰ To study with Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bunduqī, famously known as Bandafar, a key intermediary to the important works of the outstanding scholar of his generation: al-Faḍl b. Shādhān (d. 260/873).

¹¹ Al-Kulaynī took there from Ibn ‘Uqda Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sa‘īd (d. 332/944 or 333/945), Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Razzāz (d. 316/928), and Ḥumayd b. Ziyād al-Dihqān (d. 310/923). This latter was a particularly prolific transmitter of the early works known as the *uṣūl*.

¹² ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Sukayna al-Shihābī (Maṭbū‘āt Majma‘ al-Lughā al-‘Arabiyya bi-Dimashq: 2005), 65:316.

Muhammad b. Ya‘qūb, and it is said Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, Abū Ja‘far al-Kulaynī. From among the *shuyūkh* of the Rāfiḍa. He travelled up to Damascus and narrated *ḥadīth* in Baalbek ...¹³

Of course, there is a degree of speculation in the above reconstruction, but what is known for sure is that al-Kulaynī returned to his native Rayy after his travels, for it is here that al-Najāshī places him:

شَيْخُ أَصْحَابِنَا فِي وَقْتِهِ بِالرَّيِّ، وَوَجَّهُهُمْ.

The *shaykh* of our companions [i.e. the Shī‘a] in Rayy in his time and their preeminent one.¹⁴

It is also here where having made his mark as a scholar that al-Kulaynī would have started authoring *al-Kāfi*.

al-Najāshī says:

صَنَّفَ الْكِتَابَ الْكَبِيرَ الْمَعْرُوفَ بِالْكَلَيْنِيِّ يُسَمَّى الْكَافِي فِي عِشْرِينَ سَنَةً.

He authored the big book, famously named after al-Kulaynī,¹⁵ and which is [actually] entitled *al-Kāfi*, in [a period of] twenty years.¹⁶

¹³ Ibn ‘Asākir names one ‘Abdullāh b. Muḥammad b. Dhakwān (d. 380/990 or 383/993) among those who narrate from al-Kulaynī. The latter was a judge (*qāḍī*) in Baalbek; see Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. ‘Alī Ibn Manzūr, *Mukhtaṣar tārikh Dimashq* (Dār al-Fikr: 1409/1989), 13:297–298. I contend that Ibn ‘Asākir could place al-Kulaynī in Baalbek because he saw a *ḥadīth* (which he does not cite) in which the aforementioned ‘Abdullāh b. Muḥammad b. Dhakwān narrates from al-Kulaynī while specifying that this transmission happened in Baalbek. For a parallel case where Ibn ‘Asākir is able to place someone in Baalbek because of this exact scenario, see Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rikh madinat Dimashq*, 63:115.

¹⁴ Al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 377.

¹⁵ They would refer to the book as “*Kitāb al-Kulaynī*” or al-Kulaynī’s book.

¹⁶ Ibid.

It is only towards the end of his life¹⁷ and after having completed authoring *al-Kāfi*¹⁸ that al-Kulaynī relocated to Baghdad where he resided in the *Darb al-Silsila* (Chain Road) which was within the Kufan Gate (district).¹⁹

¹⁷ This is also the opinion of Ayatollah Ḥusayn al-Burūjirdī (d. 1961); see Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī al-Burūjirdī, *Iṭlāla ʿalā l-rijāl wa-l-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Mahdī Najaf (Muʿassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī: 2000), 18–19. This is contrary to Newman who holds that al-Kulaynī was already in Baghdad in 300/912-913 and authored *al-Kāfi* there; see Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shiism*, 94–96. There is no evidence that al-Kulaynī was in Baghdad before 327/938-939. The latter date, given by al-Ṭūsī in a quotation provided in this paper, is the second undisputed anchor about his life apart from the year of his death. I do not completely rule out an early visit as an anonymous student, for Baghdad had become the centre for scholarship in the Islamic world beginning from the second half of the 2nd/8th century onwards; but, scholars who postulate a long stay in Baghdad or him taking up residence there before the late date are to be ignored for the weight of circumstantial evidence is against this. If al-Kulaynī had a long stay in Baghdad he would have also surely featured in the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm (written in 377/987) who was active as a copyist in Baghdad, or the *Taʾrikh Baghdad* of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071); see Amir-Moezzi and Ansari, “Perfecting a Religion,” 126.

¹⁸ Consider how al-Ṣadūq received *al-Kāfi* from intermediaries who are from Kulayn and greater Rayy such as Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ʿIṣām al-Kulaynī and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Sinānī who is said to have relocated to Rayy; see Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Ṣadūq, *Man lā yaḥḍuruḥu al-faqīh*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Muʿassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1992), 4:534. This means that al-Kulaynī would have taught *al-Kāfi* locally before setting out for Baghdad.

¹⁹ Baghdad as a city was girdled with a circular wall and pierced by four monumental gates: Basran Gate to the southwest, Kufan Gate to the southeast, Khurāsān Gate to the northeast, and Syrian Gate to the northwest. These gates were used to divide the city into four districts; see Sylvie

This is where al-Kulaynī began teaching and formally transmitting his work to students in live audition sessions as late as the last year of his life.

Al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) gives us these details when recording one of his chains to *al-Kāfi*:²⁰

وَأَخْبَرَنَا بِهِ أَيضًا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ عَبْدِوَنَ الْمَعْرُوفُ بِابْنِ الْحَاشِرِ، عَنْ أَحْمَدَ بْنِ أَبِي رَافِعٍ، وَأَبِي الْحُسَيْنِ عَبْدِ الْكَرِيمِ بْنِ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ نَصْرِ الْبَزَّازِ بَيْتَيْسَ وَبَعْدَادَ، عَنْ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ يَعْقُوبَ الْكُلَيْبِيِّ، جَمِيعَ مُصَنَّفَاتِهِ وَأَحَادِيثِهِ سَمَاعًا وَإِجَازَةً، بِبَغْدَادَ بِيَابِ الْكُوفَةِ بِدَرْبِ السِّلْسِلَةِ، سَنَةَ سَبْعٍ وَعِشْرِينَ وَثَلَاثِمِائَةً.

Aḥmad b. ‘Ubdūn, well-known as Ibn al-Ḥāshir, also reported it to us [i.e. the book *al-Kāfi*] from Aḥmad b. Abī Rāfi‘ and Abū l-Ḥusayn ‘Abd al-Karīm b. ‘Abdullāh b. Naṣr al-Bazzāz in Tinnīs²¹ and Baghdad, from Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-al-Kulaynī, all his *muṣannafāt* (authored works) and *ḥadīth*, via *samā‘* (direct hearing from him) and *ijāza* (what he gave license for), in Baghdad, at the Kufan Gate, at the *Darb al-Silsila* (Chain Road), in the year 327 [938-939 C.E.].

Another invaluable testimony is by the prolific narrator, Abū Ghālib al-Zurārī (d. 368/978), who resided in Baghdad and studied directly under al-Kulaynī. He says the following when listing out the

Denoix, “Founded Cities of the Arab World from the Seventh to the Eleventh Centuries,” in Salma K. Jayyusi et al. (eds.), *The City in the Islamic World* (Brill: 2008), 1:130. The district by the Kufan Gate had its own graveyard where al-Kulaynī and other prominent scholars were buried.

²⁰ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tahdhīb al-aḥkām*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 2007), 10:383.

²¹ A medieval island-city in Lake Manzala, Egypt which is currently not populated having been abandoned.

books in his possession:²²

وَجَمِيعَ كِتَابِ الْكَافِي تَصْنِيفُ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ يَعْقُوبَ الْكَلِينِي، رَوَاتِي عَنْهُ،
بَعْضُهُ قِرَاءَةً وَبَعْضُهُ إِجَازَةً، وَقَدْ نَسَحْتُ مِنْهُ كِتَابَ الصَّلَاةِ وَالصَّوْمِ فِي نُسخَةٍ،
وَكِتَابَ الْحَجِّ فِي نُسخَةٍ، وَكِتَابَ الطُّهْرِ وَالْحَيْضِ فِي جُزْءٍ، وَالْجَمِيعَ مُجَلَّدًا، وَعَزَمِي
أَنْ أُنسَخَ بَقِيَّةَ الْكِتَابِ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ، فِي جُزْءٍ وَاحِدٍ، وَرَقِّ طَلْحِي.

The whole of the book *al-Kāfi*, authorship of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-al-Kulaynī. My transmission [directly] on his authority. A part of it is *qirā’a* [i.e. what was read out to him] and a part of it is *ijāza* [i.e. what he gave license for]. I have transcribed from it [in my own handwriting] *kitāb al-ṣalāt* and *kitāb al-ṣawm* in a single *nuskha* (document), *kitāb al-ḥajj* in a single *nuskha*, and the *kitāb al-ṭuhr wa-l-ḥayḍ* in a *juz’* (fascicule).²³ The whole [work] is *mujallad* (a leather-bound volume).²⁴ It is my intention to copy the rest of the book, if Allāh wills, in a single *juz’*²⁵ of *Ṭalḥī*²⁶ paper.

²² Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Abū Ghālib al-Zurārī, *Risālat Abī Ghālib al-Zurārī ilā ibn ibnihi fī dhikr āl A‘yan*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Jalālī (Maktab al-A‘lām al-Islāmī: 1990), 176–177.

²³ A *juz’* seems to have been a fascicule of about 20 folios; see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon* (Brill: 2007), 61.

²⁴ A *mujallad* was larger than a *juz’* since it consisted of several *juz’* bound together in a single “volume.”

²⁵ In this context a “single *juz’*” is to be understood as whole work running to the end without break.

²⁶ *Ṭalḥī* paper was a kind of fine-quality paper manufactured in Egypt and named after Ṭalḥa b. Ṭāhir (d. 215/830), one of the early operators of a paper mill in Islam and the governor of Khurāsān under the Abbasid Caliph Ma‘mūn (d. 218/833); see Ayman Fu‘ād Sayyid, “Ṣinā‘a al-kitāb al-‘arabī al-makḥṭūṭ,” *Annales Islamologiques* 31, no. 1 (1997), 9.

Baghdad had long become the most important city in the Islamic world with leading scholars in all the different fields flocking there. Its prominence as a centre for Shīʿī scholarship at this time rivalled that of Qom. It is likely that al-Kulaynī chose to present his work in Baghdad because if it were to gain acclaim there, it would be universally acclaimed.²⁷

The work's significance became readily apparent²⁸ and *al-Kāfi* was well-received as the number of students who transmitted it from the author attests.²⁹

²⁷ The choice can also be explained by the fact that Qom already boasted a number of super-compilations that collected vast number of *ḥadīth* across different topics, such as *Nawādir al-ḥikma* by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā (d. 280/893), *al-Maḥāsin* by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khālīd (d. 274/888 or 280/894), and *al-Raḥma* by Saʿd b. ʿAbdullāh (d. between 299–301/911–913), whereas there was no similar work that had a Baghdadi imprint. This point was made by Ali al-Nawfali in a private correspondence to the author of the present work. Thanks is also due to Ali al-Nawfali for reviewing the present work and suggesting numerous improvements.

²⁸ Already al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), and speaking only two generations after al-Kulaynī in Baghdad, describes *al-Kāfi* as: “among the most revered books of the Shīʿa and the most replete with benefit”; see Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān al-Mufīd, *Taṣḥīḥ al-iʿtiqād* (al-Muʿtamar al-ʿĀlamī li-Alfiyya al-Shaykh al-Mufīd: 1993), 70. For the reception of the Four Books in a later period, see Amin Ehteshami, “The Four Books of Shīʿī Ḥadīth: From Inception to Consolidation,” *Islamic Law and Society* 29, no. 3 (2021).

²⁹ Al-Najāshī and al-Ṭūsī name no less than 8 students who heard the work in Baghdad: Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm b. Abī Rāfiʿ al-Ṣaymarī, Aḥmad b. Aḥmad al-Kūfī, Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Saʿd al-Kūfī, Abū Ghālīb al-Zurārī (d. 368/978), Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. Qūlawayh (d. 368/978), ʿAbd al-Karīm b. ʿAbdallāh al-Bazzāz, Hārūn b. Mūsā al-Tallaʿukbarī (d. 385/995), and Abū Mufaḍḍal al-Shaybānī (d. 387/997). A full analysis of all the known transmitters of *al-Kāfi* can be found in al-Burūjirdī, *Iṭlāla ʿalā l-rijāl wa-l-ḥadīth*, 46–56.

Al-Najāshī recalls the work being taught in his own early years:³⁰

كُنْتُ أَتَرَدُّ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْمَعْرُوفِ بِمَسْجِدِ اللَّوْلُؤِيِّ، وَهُوَ مَسْجِدُ نَفْطَوَيْهِ
النَّحْوِيِّ، أَقْرَأُ الْقُرْآنَ عَلَى صَاحِبِ الْمَسْجِدِ، وَجَمَاعَةً مِنْ أَصْحَابِنَا يَفْرَأُونَ
كِتَابَ الْكَافِيِّ عَلَى أَبِي الْحُسَيْنِ أَحْمَدَ بْنِ أَحْمَدَ الْكُوفِيِّ الْكَاتِبِ، حَدَّثَكُمْ مُحَمَّدُ
بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ الْكَلْبِيِّ.

I used to frequent the *masjid* famously known as Masjid al-Lu'lu'i, and it is the *masjid* of Niftawayh al-Nahwī,³¹ so as to learn the Qur'ān at the hands of the Imam [lit. *ṣāhib*] of the *masjid*, while a group of our companions would be reading aloud the book *al-Kāfi* to Abī l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Aḥmad al-Kūfī al-Kātib [saying:]: “Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī narrated to you.”

Al-Kulaynī died in Baghdad and was buried there. Al-Ṭūsī gives two different death years in his two books. In the *Fihrist* he says:

وَتُوفِّيَ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ سَنَةَ ثَمَانٍ وَعِشْرِينَ وَثَلَاثِمِائَةً بَعْدَادَ، وَدُفِنَ بِبَابِ
الْكُوفَةِ فِي مَقْبَرَتِهَا، قَالَ ابْنُ عَبْدِوَنَ: رَأَيْتُ قَبْرَهُ فِي صَرَاةِ الطَّائِيِّ، وَعَلَيْهِ لَوْحٌ
مَكْتُوبٌ فِيهِ اسْمُهُ وَاسْمُ أَبِيهِ.

Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb died in the year 328 [939-940 C.E.] in Baghdad and was buried by the Kufan Gate in its graveyard. Ibn 'Ubdūn said: I had seen his grave in Ṣirāṭ al-Ṭā'i and on it was a board in which was written his name and the name of his father.³²

While in the *Rijāl* he says:

³⁰ Al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 377.

³¹ Niftawayh (d. 323/935) was a prominent grammarian. His *masjid* was located in Baghdad.

³² Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Jawād al-Qayyūmī (Mu'assasat Nashr al-Faqāha: 2008), 211.

مَاتَ سَنَةَ تِسْعٍ وَعِشْرِينَ وَثَلَاثِمِائَةً، فِي شَعْبَانَ، فِي بَغْدَادَ، وَدُفِنَ بِبَابِ الْكُوفَةِ.

He died in the year 329 [941 C.E.] in [the month of] Sha‘bān in Baghdad and was buried by the Kufan Gate.³³

Al-Najāshī, who is writing after al-Ṭūsī, gives al-Kulaynī’s death year as 329/940-941 and provides an extra detail:

وَمَاتَ أَبُو جَعْفَرٍ الْكُلَيْنِيُّ رَحِمَهُ اللَّهُ بِبَغْدَادَ سَنَةَ تِسْعٍ وَعِشْرِينَ وَثَلَاثِمِائَةً، سَنَةَ تَنَاقُرِ النُّجُومِ، وَصَلَّى عَلَيْهِ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ جَعْفَرِ الْحُسَيْنِيِّ أَبُو قَيْرَاطٍ، وَدُفِنَ بِبَابِ الْكُوفَةِ، وَقَالَ لَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ عَبْدِوَنَ: كُنْتُ أَعْرِفُ قَبْرَهُ، وَقَدْ انْدَرَسَ.

Abū Ja‘far al-Kulaynī, may Allāh have mercy on him, died in Baghdad, in the year 329 [940-941 C.E.], the year of the scattering of the stars.³⁴ Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Ḥasanī Abū Qīrāṭ prayed over him and he was buried at the Kufan Gate. Aḥmad b. ‘Ubdūn said to us: I used to know [the location of] his grave but it has become effaced.³⁵

The fact that it was Abū Qīrāṭ Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Ḥasanī (d.

³³ Al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 439.

³⁴ Presumably because there was an observable meteor shower that year. However, Muḥammad Taqī al-Tustarī (d. 1415/1994) questions whether al-Najāshī got this wrong as there is no record in the historical chronicles of any abnormal celestial activity in 329 as opposed to the year 323; see Muḥammad Taqī al-Tustarī, *Qāmūs al-Rijāl* (Mu‘assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī: 1989), 9:661. Al-Tustarī quotes al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956 or 346/957) who states: “There was in the year 323 a great and fearsome falling of the stars, and it happened on the night in which the Qarāmiṭa attacked the pilgrims of Iraq on the road to Kufa”; see ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Manshūrāt al-Jāmi‘a al-Libnāniyya: 1974), 5:21.

³⁵ Al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 377–378.

345/956), who is identified by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071)³⁶ as the distinguished *naqīb*³⁷ of all the Ṭālibids³⁸ in Baghdad, who prayed over al-Kulaynī's dead body, indicates that al-Kulaynī had already made his mark in Baghdad and his fame only kept growing posthumously.

Al-Ṭūsī describes al-Kulaynī as possessing an “esteemed status” (*jalīl al-qadr*) and says that he was “knowledgeable about reports” (*‘ālim bi-l-akhbār*).³⁹ Al-Najāshī labels him “the most trustworthy of people in *ḥadīth*” (*awthaq al-nās bi-l-ḥadīth*).⁴⁰

The praise transcends sectarian boundaries and the Sunni scholar Ibn Athīr (d. 606/1209) famously names al-Kulaynī as the “reviver” (*mujaddid*) of the Imāmiyya in the 3rd/9th century.⁴¹

2. Why Did al-Kulaynī Author *al-Kāfi*?

What can be gleaned from a critical passage in al-Kulaynī's introduction is that he decided to author the book in response to the request of an unnamed contemporary,⁴² who confessed his inability to choose which report to follow in the face of contradictory reports.

Al-Kulaynī paraphrases the latter's request as follows:⁴³

³⁶ Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Thābit al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma’rūf (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī: 2001), 2:525–6.

³⁷ The official title “*naqīb*” was first created by the Caliph al-Musta‘īn bi-llāh (d. 252/866) and usually given to a descendant of ‘Alī in each town whose role it was to manage the affairs of other Ṭālibids.

³⁸ Ṭālibids were descendants of the Prophet's uncle Abū Ṭālib.

³⁹ Al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, 439.

⁴⁰ Al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 377.

⁴¹ Al-Mubārak b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr, *Jāmi‘ al-uṣūl fi aḥādīth al-rasūl*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā’ūt (Maktabat al-Ḥulwānī: 1392/1972), 11:323.

⁴² Al-Kulaynī addresses him as *akhī* or “brother” throughout the introduction.

⁴³ Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1968), 1:8.

وَدَكَرْتَ أَنَّ أُمُورًا قَدْ أَشْكَكَتْ عَلَيْكَ، لَا تَعْرِفُ حَقَائِقَهَا لِاخْتِلَافِ الرِّوَايَةِ فِيهَا، وَأَنَّكَ تَعْلَمُ أَنَّ اخْتِلَافَ الرِّوَايَةِ فِيهَا لِاخْتِلَافِ عِلَلِهَا وَأَسْبَابِهَا، وَأَنَّكَ لَا تَجِدُ بِحَضْرَتِكَ مَنْ تُذَاكِرُهُ وَتُفَاوِضُهُ مِمَّنْ تَتَّقُ بِعِلْمِهِ فِيهَا.

You mentioned that matters have become confusing for you: you cannot discern the true position in them because of differences in the reports concerning them. And [you mentioned] that you understand that differences in the reports is because of differences in their [i.e. the reports'] circumstances and occasions,⁴⁴ and [you mentioned] that you do not find in your presence⁴⁵ one whose knowledge of them [i.e., the reports] you trust and with whom you could discuss and consult.

Because of this, the unnamed contemporary wants al-Kulaynī, whose knowledge of *ḥadīth* he trusts, to author a collection of reports across all subjects to which he can refer and freely take from:

وَقُلْتَ إِنَّكَ مُحِبٌّ أَنْ يَكُونَ عِنْدَكَ كِتَابٌ كَافٍ يُجْمَعُ فِيهِ مِنْ جَمِيعِ فُنُونِ عِلْمِ الدِّينِ، مَا يَكْتَفِي بِهِ الْمُتَعَلِّمُ، وَيَرْجِعُ إِلَيْهِ الْمُسْتَشْرِئُ، وَيَأْخُذُ مِنْهُ مَنْ يُرِيدُ

⁴⁴ Reports of the Imams could differ due to a difference in circumstances (*ʿilal*) and relevant occasions (*asbāb*). The circumstance or occasion may at times be preserved in the report itself or may be lost. An illustrative example is when the Imam allows one companion to repay the supererogatory prayers (*nawāfil*) missed by day at night when on a journey but does not allow another to do the same. Upon inquiry the Imam reveals that he allowed the former because he has the strength for it; see al-Ṭūsī, *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām*, 2:17. Now if this explanation were not preserved, one would have generalised the Imam's response and it would seem to be contradicting other reports.

⁴⁵ This is presumably because the petitioner was living in a remote region far away from the main intellectual centres of the Shīʿī world at the time such as Qom and Baghdad.

عَلَّمَ الدِّينَ وَالْعَمَلَ بِهِ بِالْأَثَارِ الصَّحِيحَةِ عَنِ الصَّادِقِينَ عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ وَالسُّنَنَ
الْقَائِمَةَ الَّتِي عَلَيْهَا الْعَمَلُ، وَبِهَا يُؤَدَّى فَرَضَ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ وَسُنَّةَ نَبِيِّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ.

You said that you desire to have with you a “sufficient” book (*kitābun kāf*) in which the whole range of religious knowledge (*‘ilm al-dīn*) is gathered. [A book] that can suffice for a student (*muta‘allim*); to which a seeker of guidance (*mustarshad*) can make reference; and from which can take the one who desires [to acquire] the knowledge of religion and acting upon it on the basis of authentic reports (*āthār al-ṣaḥīḥa*) from the *ṣādiqīn* (truthful ones) [i.e., Imams], peace be upon them, and the established *sunan* (precedents), upon which action is [supposed to be] based, and by which the obligation of Allāh, mighty and majestic, and the *sunna* of His prophet, blessings of Allāh be upon him and his family, is fulfilled.

The title al-Kulaynī chose for the book, *al-Kāfī* or “The Sufficient,” is directly related to the unnamed contemporary’s appeal for a *kitābun kāf* (“sufficient book”) above. That is to say, the book had to cover all subjects such that no additional book is needed.

Also of note is that the target audience of the book was not restricted to senior scholars, rather, the book was envisioned as being useful for students beginning their journey of seeking knowledge, as well as those among the laity who merely wanted to discharge their obligations under the law.

This may help explain why al-Kulaynī does not typically delve into technical detail in the book, nor elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of arguments made by previous scholars who had taken different positions about a matter, before giving justification for his own personal preference.

Al-Kulaynī ends the passage by encapsulating the fervent hope the

unnamed contemporary had for the book:

وَقُلْتُ: لَوْ كَانَ ذَلِكَ، رَجَوْتُ أَنْ يَكُونَ ذَلِكَ سَبَبًا يَتَذَارَكُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى بِمَعُونَتِهِ
وَتَوْفِيقِهِ إِخْوَانَنَا وَأَهْلَ مِلَّتِنَا، وَيُقْبَلُ بِهِمْ إِلَى مَرَادِهِمْ.

You said that if this [book] were to happen then you hope that it would become a means through which Allāh, the Exalted, takes hold of our brethren and co-religionists, by His assistance and facilitation, and leads them to their ultimate goals.

3. Did al-Kulaynī Only Include the *Ṣaḥīḥ*?

While there is no explicit declaration in al-Kulaynī’s words to the effect that “there is nothing but the *ṣaḥīḥ* in my book,” the unnamed contemporary had requested a practical book for acquiring religious knowledge and acting upon it in day-to-day life “based on the authentic reports (*āthār al-ṣaḥīḥa*) from the *ṣādiqīn* [Imams],” and al-Kulaynī seemingly fulfils this. Al-Kulaynī says towards the end of the introduction which was evidently written after⁴⁶ he had finished composing the book.⁴⁷

وَقَدْ يَسَّرَ اللَّهُ، وَلَهُ الْحَمْدُ، تَأْلِيفَ مَا سَأَلْتُ، وَأَرْجُو أَنْ يَكُونَ بِحَيْثُ تَوَخَّيْتُ،
فَمَهْمَا كَانَ فِيهِ مِنْ تَقْصِيرٍ فَلَمْ تُقْصِرْ نَيْتُنَا فِي إِهْدَاءِ النَّصِيحَةِ، إِذْ كَانَتْ

⁴⁶ Apart from speaking of the work as finished in the passage translated, another piece of evidence demonstrating that al-Kulaynī’s introduction was written after completing the book is when he comments in the introduction that he not fully satisfied with the length of *Kitāb al-ḥujja* (a sub-book) as found within *al-Kāfi* and promises: “If the appointed term [i.e. death] is delayed then we shall author a book that is more comprehensive and complete than it, wherein we will fulfil its due, if Allāh, the Exalted, wills”; see al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:9. Alas! He was never able to accomplish this.

⁴⁷ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:9.

وَاجِبَةٌ لِإِخْوَانِنَا وَأَهْلِ مِلَّتِنَا، مَعَ مَا رَجَوْنَا أَنْ نَكُونَ مُشَارِكِينَ لِكُلِّ مَنْ اقْتَبَسَ مِنْهُ، وَعَمِلَ بِمَا فِيهِ فِي دَهْرِنَا هَذَا، وَفِي غَايِرِهِ إِلَى انْقِضَاءِ الدُّنْيَا.

Allāh, may He be praised, has made easy the authoring of what you requested. I hope that it is as you had envisioned. Whatever deficiency there may be in it then [rest assured that] there was no shortage in our intention to present goodly counsel [through it]. For that is obligatory [on us] towards our brothers and co-religionists. Besides our hope that we be a partner [in the reward] of whoever is guided through it, and acts based upon what is in it, in this present age of ours, and in the future, until the end of the world.⁴⁸

Al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1104/1693) was one of the first scholars to draw attention to this passage⁴⁹ and use it to assert that al-Kulaynī only included the reports that were *ṣaḥīḥ*.

Surely, however, this is a case of reading too much into what is essentially flowery prose—as is conventional in the introduction of books—and seeking from it a precision that is not there. An easy demonstration of this is that not all the reports in the book are from the “*ṣādiqīn*” or Imams; rather, fallible figures such as companions and others are quoted,⁵⁰ so if this is possible then perhaps the condition

⁴⁸ I say: It has happened as he hoped because of the sincerity of his intention. May Allāh reward him amply!

⁴⁹ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-Shīʿa*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Jalālī (Muʿassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth: 1993), 30:195–197. This position is taken up and defended vigorously by Mīrzā al-Nūrī (d. 1320/1902); see Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, *Khātimat Mustadrak al-Wasāʾil* (Muʿassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth: 2008), 3:480.

⁵⁰ Sayyid al-Khoei mentions 12 examples of al-Kulaynī narrating from an individual other than the Imams; see Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim al-Khoei, *Muʿjam*

that all the reports should be *ṣaḥīḥ* is also not as water-tight.

Furthermore, and even if it is granted that it was al-Kulaynī's aim to strictly include only the *ṣaḥīḥ*, then what al-Kulaynī deemed to be *ṣaḥīḥ* in his eyes is not binding on the scholars who came after him, mainly because he does not specify or define what *ṣaḥīḥ* means to him and how he arrives at such a judgment which may be subjective and open to dispute.⁵¹

See addendum 2 for the difference between how *qudamā'* (early scholars) and *muta'akhhirīn* (later scholars) use the term "*ṣaḥīḥ*."

4. Al-Kulaynī and the Three Principles

Al-Kulaynī must have been aware of the presence of fabricated reports attributed to the Imams, but he does not explain his methodology of selecting reports for inclusion in the book.

However, there is a critical passage towards the end of the introduction where al-Kulaynī outlines three general principles that should be followed in the face of contradiction between reports, for this was the greatest concern of the unnamed contemporary who prompted the authoring of the book:

فَاعْلَمْ يَا أَخِي، أَرْشَدَكَ اللَّهُ، أَنَّهُ لَا يَسَعُ أَحَدًا تَمْيِيزُ شَيْءٍ مِمَّا اخْتَلَفَتِ الرَّوَايَةُ

rijāl al-ḥadīth (Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Khū'ī al-Islāmiyya: n.d.), 1:83–85. This is not an exhaustive list and there are other instances that could be added.

⁵¹ Thus, we find that scholars who come immediately after al-Kulaynī such as al-Ṣadūq and al-Ṭūsī did not deal with all the reports in *al-Kāfi* as though they were above reproach and went on to reject a number of them. Sayyid al-Khoei gives one example of al-Ṣadūq rejecting a report in *al-Kāfi* in favour of a *tawqī'* (rescript) which he had in his possession in the handwriting of the Imam; see al-Khoei, *Mu'jam rijāl al-ḥadīth*, 1:26. He also gives five examples of al-Ṭūsī doing the same; see al-Khoei, *Mu'jam rijāl al-ḥadīth*, 1:28–33.

فِيهِ عَنِ الْعُلَمَاءِ عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ بِرَأْيِهِ.

Know then, O my brother, may Allāh guide you, that it does not befit anyone to prefer one thing [position over another] in that [matter] which the reports from the scholars [the Imams] have opposed [each other] by using his personal opinion.

إِلَّا عَلَى مَا أَطْلَقَهُ الْعَالِمُ بِقَوْلِهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «أَعْرَضُوهَا عَلَى كِتَابِ اللَّهِ، فَمَا وَافَقَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ فَخُذُوهُ، وَمَا خَالَفَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ فَرُدُّوهُ».

Except [on the basis of] that which the scholar [Imam] had stated in his words: “Compare it with the Book of Allāh, so that which is consistent with the Book of Allāh, Mighty and Majestic, then take it, and that which opposes the Book of Allāh then reject it.”

وَقَوْلُهُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «دَعُوا مَا وَافَقَ الْقَوْمَ، فَإِنَّ الرُّشْدَ فِي خِلَافِهِمْ».

And his words: “Abandon that which is in agreement with the group [i.e., the non-Shī‘a], for the truth is in opposing them.”⁵²

وَقَوْلُهُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «خُذُوا بِالْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ، فَإِنَّ الْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ».

And his words: “Take that which is united upon, for there is no doubt in that which is united upon.”

⁵² Newman renders this as: “there is integrity (*rushd*) in the disagreement within the community” which is a complete mistranslation and makes it seem as though the Imam was encouraging disagreement within the Shī‘ī community!; see Newman, *The Formative Period*, 100. In fact, *qawm* here refers to the non-Shī‘ī and adopting a position which is contrary to theirs will lead to *rushd* or guidance (not integrity) because it will have circumvented *taqiyya* as is explained in this paper.

al-Kulaynī's Introduction	The <i>maqbūla</i> of 'Umar b. Ḥaṅẓala
إِلَّا عَلَى مَا أَطْلَقَهُ الْعَالَمُ بِقَوْلِهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «أَعْرَضُوهَا عَلَى كِتَابِ اللَّهِ، فَمَا وَافَقَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ فَخُذُوهُ، وَمَا خَالَفَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ فَرُدُّوهُ».	قَالَ: يُنْظَرُ، فَمَا وَافَقَ حُكْمَهُ حُكْمَ الْكِتَابِ.
وَقَوْلُهُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «دَعُوا مَا وَافَقَ الْقَوْمَ، فَإِنَّ الرُّشْدَ فِي خِلَافِهِمْ».	قَالَ: مَا خَالَفَ الْعَامَّةَ فَفِيهِ الرِّشَادُ.
وَقَوْلُهُ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «خُذُوا بِالْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ، فَإِنَّ الْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ».	فَإِنَّ الْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ.

Table 1. The comparison of al-Kulaynī's introduction and the *maqbūla* of 'Umar b. Ḥaṅẓala.

Note that all the three principles to be used in dealing with contradiction are derived directly from the words of the Imam, which confirms the depiction of al-Kulaynī as a traditionist who does not see “reason” as having a primary role in defining creed or law.

A careful analysis of the key words found in this passage reveals that all three principles are to be found in a single report which al-Kulaynī himself transmits in *al-Kāfi* (see Table 1).⁵³ This is the report called the *maqbūla* (accepted report) of 'Umar b. Ḥaṅẓala.⁵⁴

Now that it is known that the *maqbūla* very likely influenced al-Kulaynī's thinking, since principles found in it also appear near-verbatim

⁵³ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:67–68.

⁵⁴ So-called because the report is traditionally “accepted” by scholars even if its chain is not technically *ṣaḥīḥ*. While the rest of the narrators in the chain are *thiqa*, 'Umar the primary narrator himself is unmentioned in the books of *rijāl*. Of course, this fact in of itself would not necessarily make his report not *ṣaḥīḥ* in the estimation of the *qudamā'* as is explained in addendum 2 of this paper.

in his introduction, it would be useful to delve deeper into it.⁵⁵

4.1 Analysing the *maq̄būla*

The *maq̄būla* is a significant report much discussed by Shī'ī jurists to this day because it addresses what is to be done when reports narrated by different companions contradict each other. The Imam provides principles to be applied sequentially to resolve the deadlock.

The *maq̄būla* begins with the companion 'Umar asking Imam al-Ṣādiq whether it would be allowed for two Shī'a who have a dispute between themselves about a debt or inheritance (financial matter) to go to the *sultān* (temporal ruler) and the *quḍāt* (judges) to obtain a ruling from them.

The Imam likens this to submitting to the authority of the *ṭāghūt* (authorities apart from Allāh), and whatever gain issues from the ruling to be illegitimate even if one was in the right.⁵⁶

Rather, the correct course of action would be to seek out from among the Shī'ī one who has “transmitted our [i.e., the Imams'] *ḥadīths*,” has looked into “our *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*” and has “known our rulings,” and submit to his judgment, for the Imam officially appoints such a one as judge over the disputants.

'Umar asks what should be done if the disputing parties agree between themselves to each appoint a candidate who meets the above criteria to look into the issue, and the two come to opposing judgments, basing their difference on divergent reports attributed to “you” (i.e., the Imams).

⁵⁵ Newman discusses al-Kulaynī's *muqaddima* but does not link it to the *maq̄būla* of 'Umar b. Ḥanzāla as is done in the present work.

⁵⁶ While the context of the *maq̄būla* has to do with opposing verdicts of judges in a court setting, it was considered to have great ramifications for cases of contradictory reports in so far as the Imāmī judges were not ruling based on their *ra'y* (personal opinion) or *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) but textual reports attributed to the Imams which could contradict.

The Imam declares that the ruling to be followed is the one pronounced by the one who is the more morally upright (*a'dal*) of the two, the more learned (*afqah*), the more truthful in speech (*aṣḍaq*), and the more pious (*awra'*).

‘Umar asks what is to be done when both candidates are equally matched in these areas such that “no-one of them has precedence over the other.”

The Imam replies:⁵⁷

فَقَالَ: «يُنْظَرُ إِلَى مَا كَانَ مِنْ رَوَايَتِهِمْ عَنَّا فِي ذَلِكَ الَّذِي حَكَمَّا بِهِ، الْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَصْحَابِكَ، فَيُؤْخَذُ بِهِ مِنْ حُكْمِنَا، وَيُتْرَكُ الشَّاذُّ الَّذِي لَيْسَ بِمَشْهُورٍ عِنْدَ أَصْحَابِكَ، فَإِنَّ الْمُجْمَعِ عَلَيْهِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ».

You look for that report attributed to us and on whose basis they rule which is *mujma' alayhi* [united upon] by your fellows so it is taken as being our judgment, and the *shādh* which is not famous in the estimation of your fellows is abandoned, for there is no doubt in that which is united upon.

‘Umar asks:

قُلْتُ: «فَإِنْ كَانَ الْخَبْرَانِ عَنْكُمَا مَشْهُورَيْنِ قَدْ رَوَاهُمَا الثَّقَاتُ عَنْكُمَا؟»

What if both reports from you are famous (*mashhūr*) and narrated by *thiqāt* (trustworthy narrators) from you?

The above quoted statement is key, because it is a restatement of ‘Umar’s understanding of where one stands so far in the decision tree:

⁵⁷ Notice that it is at this stage that the Imam shifts from the personal qualities of the candidate (and transmitter of reports from the Imam) to the nature of the report itself. This is important because what was required of the Shī‘ī was to submit to the authority of the Imam as per the words of a narrator they could trust, not to directly engage in criticism of the *matn* (content of the report) based on our deficient intellect.

What if both reports are transmitted by those matched in their trustworthiness (*thiqāt*), on top of which, none of the reports are “united upon,” that is, both reports (and the positions they advocate) are famous and widely accepted (*mashhūr*) such that neither can be considered *shādh*?⁵⁸

To put it differently, the Imam has given two tie-breakers in cases of contradiction so far: The relative *wathāqa* (trustworthiness) of the two knowledgeable individuals and the *shuhra* (fame) of the proof-text or position they advocate.

It is when both are equally balanced that the Imam introduces an additional principle saying:

قَالَ: «يُنظَرُ فَمَا وَافَقَ حُكْمُهُ حُكْمَ الْكِتَابِ وَالسُّنَّةِ وَخَالَفَ الْعَامَّةَ، فَيُؤْخَذُ بِهِ، وَيُتْرَكُ مَا خَالَفَ حُكْمُهُ حُكْمَ الْكِتَابِ وَالسُّنَّةِ وَوَأَفَقَ الْعَامَّةَ».

You look into [them], so that [report] whose ruling is consistent with the ruling of the Book and the *sunna* and opposes the *‘amma* [non-Shī‘ī] then it is taken, and that [report] whose ruling opposes the ruling of the Book and the *sunna* and is in agreement with the *‘amma* is abandoned.

This principle is a joint one with two related variables: Consistency with the Qur’ān and the *sunna* while at the same time deviation from the practice of the *‘amma*. Many have misunderstood this and treat each independently. Opposition with the *‘amma* only becomes a factor when a consistency test against Qur’ān and the *sunna* cannot break the dead-lock.

‘Umar is aware of this fact and neutralises the first variable by asking what is to be done when both referred-to *faqīhs* (knowledgeable

⁵⁸ The Imam draws a distinction between *mujma‘ ‘alayhi* and the *shādh*, defining the latter as “that which is not famous among your companions.” Consequently, the author of the present work feels reasonably justified in defining *mujma‘ ‘alayhi* as that which most (not all of the companions) are “united upon,” in other words, the majority.

scholars)⁵⁹ buttress their position from the Qurʾān and the *sunna*, and one of the reports (and its purport) matches with the position of the *ʿamma* while the other does not.

In other words, none of the reports can be said to be opposing the Book and the *sunna*, and the only distinction that can be drawn between them is how they stack up with the practice of the *ʿamma*. Only then does the Imam instruct him to favour:

مَا خَالَفَ الْعَامَّةَ فَفِيهِ الرَّشَادُ.

That which opposes the *ʿamma*, for there is guidance in it.

ʿUmar proceeds to the scenario when both positions match the practice of the *ʿamma*. The Imam answers that one should abandon the one that “their” rulers and judges are “more inclined towards.”

ʿUmar’s final question is what to do if one cannot choose between the reports in all these different aspects. Everything being the same, the Imam asks him to “suspend” making a decision until “you meet your Imam.”

This is because:

فَإِنَّ الْوُقُوفَ عِنْدَ الشُّبُهَاتِ، خَيْرٌ مِنَ الْإِفْتِحَامِ فِي الْهَلَكَاتِ.

Halting in the face of doubts is better than rushing headlong into manifold destruction.

5. Did al-Kulaynī Apply *ʿIlm al-Rijāl*?

Al-Kulaynī mentions three of the principles found in the *maqḅūla* in his introduction as follows:

1. Comparing with the Book of Allāh (and the *sunna*).
2. Taking that which opposes the *ʿamma*.

⁵⁹ It is worthy of note that this is how ʿUmar comes to refer to the two candidates.

3. Looking for the “united upon” or consensus position. Alternatively, the “famous report” that is widely accepted.

There is one principle found in the *maq̄būla* which al-Kulaynī does not mention. This is the Imam’s initial response: Preferring the report of the one who is more morally upright, learned, truthful in speech, and pious; what ‘Umar succinctly put as “that which is transmitted by the *thiqāt*.”

Evaluating the status of a narrator in this way is a principle inspired directly from the words of the Imam and is essentially what is called *‘ilm al-rijāl*.⁶⁰

But why does al-Kulaynī not mention this principle at all? Is it because the *maq̄būla* is not the text which al-Kulaynī had in mind when writing the introduction after all? There are other reports which mention the principle of “comparing with the Qur’ān” which al-Kulaynī could have been referencing, but the other two principles are only found in the *maq̄būla*.

It is possible that al-Kulaynī forgot to mention it. For, he does not give the principles in the order they appear in the *maq̄būla* which perhaps indicates that he was relying on memory when recalling the contents of the *maq̄būla*.

Another possibility is that this principle goes unmentioned; being the first principle given by the Imam, it is assumed and already factored in by al-Kulaynī when selecting *ḥadīth* for inclusion, with the three remaining principles coming into play only when the reports of narrators well-matched in their status per *‘ilm al-rijāl* contradict.

This last possibility is strengthened when it is noted that a now-lost *Kitāb al-rijāl* is attributed to al-Kulaynī.⁶¹ Could this book have also

⁶⁰ This is a sufficient answer to those who claim that evaluating the *rijāl* has no basis in the *madhhab*. Does one need the Imam to tell us to prefer the report of the reliable one over the unknown or the suspect, when this is common sense and practised by all *‘uqalā’* (rational beings)?

⁶¹ Al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, 377.

contained the grading of narrators, or was it more akin to the *Kitāb al-Rijāl* attributed to Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khālid al-Barqī (d. 274/888 or 280/894) which merely consists of names of narrators arranged chronologically?

It must be noted that the fact that al-Kulaynī does not mention *‘ilm al-rijāl* at all in the introduction means that all this remains speculative and more work needs to be done to determine how much importance al-Kulaynī attached to *‘ilm al-rijāl* if any.

6. The Utility of the Three Principles

Apart from *‘ilm al-rijāl* which does not get a mention, al-Kulaynī is ultimately pessimistic even about the three principles which he does mention in the introduction. The problem is not the principles themselves which are given by the Imam, but his (and our) inability to employ them effectively to solve the problem of contradictions in the majority of cases.

As he says:

وَنَحْنُ لَا نَعْرِفُ مِنْ جَمِيعِ ذَلِكَ إِلَّا أَقْلَهُ.

But we do not know [the true position] from all that except a small minority.

The logic behind the first principle, which calls for selecting the report which is consistent with the Qur’ān,⁶² is that the authentic words of the Imams can never contradict the Qur’ān, as both originate from the same Divine stream. The problem is that both rulings may appear consistent to the reader, with the Qur’ān seemingly silent one way or another about a lot of rulings.⁶³

⁶² Note that the *maqūla* mentions both the Qur’ān and the *sunna* whereas al-Kulaynī only mentions the Qur’ān.

⁶³ According to Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, this principle can be very useful in the hands of a competent *faqih* since comparing with the Qur’ān does not

The logic behind the second principle, which calls for selecting the report opposed to the *‘amma*, is that a number of the statements of the Imams were issued under *taqiyya* (dissimulation) as a result of the repressive atmosphere faced by the Imams and the Shī‘ī community. The Imams would sometimes answer in accordance with the position of the majority to safeguard detection of the Shī‘ī who would stand out if they diverged from the norm. The true position in such cases is the opposite of that which agrees with the *‘amma*. The problem is that the *‘amma* themselves are divided over a number of rulings, such that one cannot say what opposing them would entail in all cases.⁶⁴

The logic behind the third principle, which calls for selecting the report which is famous and backed up by the majority of the companions, is that the Imams would have ensured that the majority of their close companions had united upon the true position regardless of any *taqiyya*. The problem is that it is difficult for us to identify what the originally famous position of the companions was in specific cases.⁶⁵

7. A Way out of the Maze: The Principle of *Takhyr*

It is because he cannot apply the three principles effectively in most

mean finding the exact ruling in the Qur’ān but looking at which report is more attuned to the ‘spirit’ of the Qur’ān. This requires one to possess a holistic grasp of the Qur’ān and its underlying ethos; see Ali al-Sistani, *Hujjiyya khabar al-wāhid*, transcribed by Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Rabbānī (n.p.: 2016), 23.

⁶⁴ This principle is effective for those practices which had become sectarian boundary-markers such as wiping the feet instead of washing them during ritual ablution, combining prayers, temporary marriage etc.

⁶⁵ The author of this present work considers this to be the greatest *qarīna* (contextual indicator) which has been lost with the passage of time. We cannot tell what the *mashhūr* position was among the earliest *aṣḥāb*. Of course, some of this is reflected in the number of reports in support of a position; but numerical superiority could be obscuring a more complex situation.

cases that al-Kulaynī comments:⁶⁶

وَلَا نَجِدُ شَيْئًا أَحْوَطَ وَلَا أَوْسَعَ مِنْ رَدِّ عِلْمِ ذَلِكَ كُلِّهِ إِلَى الْعَالِمِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ،
وَقَبُولِ مَا وَسِعَ مِنَ الْأَمْرِ فِيهِ بِقَوْلِهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ: «بِأَيِّمَا أَحَدْتُمْ مِنْ بَابِ
التَّسْلِيمِ وَسِعَكُمْ».

And we do not find anything more in keeping with caution and more accommodating than ascribing the true knowledge of all that to the scholar [Imam] and accepting the lenience there is in the matter [as found] in his words:⁶⁷ “Whichever you take if done in submission covers you [pl].”

This is al-Kulaynī’s fall-back position to be used for the overwhelming majority of cases when he is unable to identify the true report in cases of contradiction: admit failure to recognise the true position which only the Imam knows, while taking advantage of the leeway given by freely selecting any of the reports (*takhyīr*) to act upon so long as it is attributed to the Imams. This suffices with the rationale that Allāh will accept it by virtue of one’s sincerity in attempting to follow the only legitimate authorities.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:9.

⁶⁷ Al-Kulaynī is quoting here a *ḥadīth* which he himself transmits in *al-Kāfi* and in which the companion Samā‘a b. Mihrān asks Imam al-Ṣādiq what should be done if one encounters two contradictory transmissions, one permitting something and the other forbidding it. The Imam responds that he should “postpone” the decision until he can meet with one who informs him of the true position (i.e., the Imam). Al-Kulaynī immediately comments that in a variant of this report the Imam says: “Whichever [of the two] you take if done in submission covers you [sg.]”; see al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:66.

⁶⁸ Newman mischaracterises the intent of the Imam by rendering this state-

The significance of this principle for al-Kulaynī is that it does not require some evidence to be martialled in support of one position or another (which is a difficult bar to clear) but merely “submission.”

This approach to resolving contradictions between reports in the *ḥadīth* corpus may not sit well with other scholars who come after him and have a more stringent criteria before acting upon a report.

8. Conclusion

Can the insights brought to the fore in this paper—al-Kulaynī’s pessimism in his ability to employ the three principles effectively, and his lenience in arbitrarily selecting any of the contradictory reports—be used to build a profile of al-Kulaynī as a traditionist who considers any attribution to the Imam as carrying weight by default, such that he acts upon any report, even if it is technically “weak,” if there is nothing contradicting it? This would explain why he does not provide a methodology for selecting *ḥadīth* in the first place, but only principles to resolve contradictions. However, much more work is needed to support such a conclusion.

ment: “Whatever you adhere to from the domain of *al-taslīm* [your surrender i.e. becoming a Muslim] is your strength. Allāh has facilitated [this], and to him be praise”; see Newman, *The Formative Period*, 100. First of all, it is not clear where he gets the last part “Allāh has facilitated ...” It is likely that he has taken the words of al-Kulaynī that follow and mistakenly considered them to be the words of the Imam. More importantly, the crux of what the Imam is saying and which al-Kulaynī wants to highlight, that it is permissible to choose (*takhyīr*) any of the contradicting reports and act upon it as long as done in submission to the Imam, is totally obfuscated by drawing an unwarranted link between *taslīm* in this context and becoming a Muslim as well as unjustifiably translating *wasi‘akum* as “your strength.” His conclusion that “al-Kulaynī clearly did not see it as his task to reconcile apparently contradictory texts” which was “left to the Imam” whose return “was clearly expected to be imminent” is thus built on an erroneous basis; see Newman, *The Formative Period*, 101.

Addendum 1: Was *al-Kāfi* Approved by the Twelfth Imam?

There exists a claim that because *al-Kāfi* was authored during the lesser occultation when there still existed a link between the twelfth Imam and the larger community through his appointed deputies, the book was presented to the Imam who endorsed it.

The earliest that such thinking can be traced back to is in the words of Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266):⁶⁹

وَهَذَا الشَّيْخُ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ كَانَ حَيًّا فِي زَمَنِ وُكَلَاءِ الْمَهْدِيِّ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ:
عُثْمَانُ بْنُ سَعِيدِ الْعَمْرِيِّ، وَوَلَدُهُ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ مُحَمَّدٌ، وَأَبِي الْقَاسِمِ حُسَيْنُ بْنُ
رُوحٍ، وَعَلِيُّ بْنُ مُحَمَّدِ السَّمَرِيِّ، وَتُوفِّيَ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ قَبْلَ وَفَاةِ عَلِيِّ بْنِ
مُحَمَّدِ السَّمَرِيِّ؛ لِأَنَّ عَلِيَّ بْنَ مُحَمَّدِ السَّمَرِيِّ تُوُفِّيَ فِي شَعْبَانَ سَنَةِ تِسْعِ وَعِشْرِينَ
وَتَلَاثِمِائَةٍ، وَهَذَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ الْكُلَيْنِيُّ تُوُفِّيَ بِبَغْدَادَ سَنَةَ ثَمَانٍ وَعِشْرِينَ
وَتَلَاثِمِائَةٍ، فَتَصَانِيفُ هَذَا الشَّيْخِ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ يَعْقُوبَ وَرَوَايَاتُهُ فِي زَمَنِ الْوُكَلَاءِ
الْمَذْكُورِينَ فِي وَقْتِ بَحْثِ طَرِيقًا إِلَى تَحْقِيقِ مَنْقُولَاتِهِ وَتَصَدِيقِ مُصَنَّفَاتِهِ.

This *shaykh* Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb was alive in the period of the deputies (*wukalā’*) of the Maḥdī, upon him be peace: ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-‘Amrī, his son Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad, Abū l-Qāsim Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ, and ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sammārī. Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb died before the death of ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sammārī, for ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sammārī died in Sha‘bān of the year 329 [941 C.E.]; whereas Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-al-Kulaynī died in Baghdad in the year 328 [939-940 C.E.]. Thus, the works authored by this *shaykh* Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb and his transmissions were in the period of the aforemen-

⁶⁹ ‘Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Kashf al-maḥajja li-thamarat al-muhja* (Mu‘assasat Būstān Kitāb: 2009), 220.

tioned *wukalā*' and in a time where there existed an avenue for confirming his narrations and verifying his works.

Ibn Ṭāwūs merely opens the door to this possibility; however, it later assumes a life of its own among some. In particular, the following quotation is attributed to the Akhbārī scholar Mīrzā Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Nabī (killed 1232/1817):⁷⁰

الشَّيْخُ أَبُو جَعْفَرٍ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ الْكُلَيْنِيِّ الرَّازِيِّ، مُحْيِي طَرِيقَةِ أَهْلِ الْبَيْتِ عَلَى رَأْسِ الْمِائَةِ الثَّلَاثَةِ، الْمُؤَلَّفُ لِجَامِعِ «الْكَافِي» فِي مُدَّةِ عِشْرِينَ سَنَةً، الْمُتَوَفَّى قَبْلَ وَقُوعِ الْعَيْبَةِ الْكُبْرَى رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ وَالْأُولَى. وَكِتَابُهُ مُسْتَعْنٍ عَنِ الْإِطْرَاءِ، لِأَنَّهُ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ كَانَ بِمَحْضَرٍ ضِمَّنَ نُوَابِهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ، وَقَدْ سَأَلَهُ بَعْضُ الشَّيْخَةِ مِنَ النَّائِبَةِ تَأْلِيفَ كِتَابِ «الْكَافِي» لِكُونِهِ بِحَضْرَةِ مَنْ يُفَاوِضُهُ وَيُذَاكِرُهُ مِمَّنْ يَتَّقُ بَعْلِمِهِ، فَأَلَّفَ وَصَنَّفَ وَشَنَّفَ، وَحُكِيَ أَنَّهُ عَرِضَ عَلَيْهِ، فَقَالَ: «كَافٍ لِشَيْعَتِنَا».

The *shaykh* Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī, the enlivener of the path of the *ahl al-bayt* in the 3rd century [9th century C.E.], the author of the compilation '*al-Kāfi*' over a period of 20 years, who died before the occurrence of the greater occultation, may Allāh be pleased with him in the first [world] and the last. His book transcends mere praise, for he, may Allāh be pleased with him, was in the presence of his [i.e., the twelfth Imam's] deputies, and one of the Shī'a living in a remote land requested him to author the book "*al-Kāfi*" since he was in the presence of one with whom he could confer and dis-

⁷⁰ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt fī aḥwāl al-‘ulamā’ wal-sādāt* (Maktabat Ismā‘īliyyān: 2011), 6:116. Al-Khwānsārī (d. 1313/1895) is quoting from Mīrzā Muḥammad's work *Munyat al-murtād fī dhikr nufāt al-ijtihād*.

cuss, whose knowledge he trusts, so he compiled, authored, and did well.⁷¹ It is related that it [i.e. the book] was presented to him [i.e. the Imam] so he commented: “It is sufficient for our Shī‘a.”

Here, an entirely unsourced report can be seen in which the book was in fact presented to the Imam and the Imam responded with a positive approbation. Even Mīrzā al-Nūrī (d. 1320/1902), whose reputation in being liberal in accepting *ḥadīth* is well-deserved, has this to say about this report, which he notes is being quoted widely:⁷²

وَلَيْسَ غَرَضِي مِنْ ذَلِكَ تَصْحِيحَ الْخَبَرِ الشَّائِعِ مِنْ أَنَّ هَذَا الْكِتَابَ عُرِضَ عَلَيَّ
الْحُجَّةَ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ فَقَالَ: «إِنَّ هَذَا كَافٍ لِشِيعَتِنَا» فَإِنَّهُ لَا أَصْلَ لَهُ، وَلَا أَثَرَ
لَهُ فِي مُؤَلَّفَاتِ أَصْحَابِنَا.

My aim in this [discussion] is not to confirm the widespread report to the effect that this book was presented to the *ḥujja* and so he responded, “this is sufficient for our Shī‘a”; for, this [report] has no basis (*aṣl*) nor trace in the works of our fellows.

While the possibility that the work was presented to the Imam hypothetically exists, if such a thing had happened, there would surely

⁷¹ As has been noted in this paper, the anonymous individual who prompted al-Kulaynī to author the book complained of not having access to one whose knowledge of the reports he could “trust”, with whom he could “discuss,” and to whom he could “defer.” Mīrzā Muḥammad takes this to mean that al-Kulaynī had access to such a one and that this was code language alluding to the deputy and through him the Imam. However, in the opinion of this present work’s author, this is reading too much into that statement.

⁷² Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, *Khātimat Mustadrak al-Wasā’il*, 3:470. Note that Mīrzā al-Nūrī is confident that the book was actually presented to the Imam and tries to argue for this, but not on the basis of this supposed report.

be some positive evidence indicating it. No wonder then ‘Allāma al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1699) uses quite harsh words for a scholar whom he does not name, most likely Khalīl al-Qazwīnī (d. 1089/1678),⁷³ who used to state it as fact:⁷⁴

وَأَمَّا جِزْمُ بَعْضِ الْمُجَازِفِينَ بِكَوْنِ جَمِيعِ الْكَافِي مَعْرُوضًا عَلَى الْقَائِمِ عَلَيْهِ
السَّلَامُ لِكَوْنِهِ فِي بَلَدَةِ السُّفَرَاءِ فَلَا يَخْفَى مَا فِيهِ عَلَى ذِي لُبٍّ.

As for the assertion of one of the foolhardy to the effect that the whole of *al-Kāfi* was presented to the Qā'im because he was in the land of the envoys (*sufarā*) then [the incorrectness of] this is not hidden from anyone who possesses the slightest intellect.

Addendum 2: Only a Third of *al-Kāfi* Is *Ṣaḥīḥ*

A staple of contemporary anti-Shī'ī polemics is that most of *al-Kāfi* is *ḍa'īf* (weak). This begs the question; if al-Kulaynī was aiming to collect the *ṣaḥīḥ*, how might this have arisen?

The exact number of *ḥadīth* found in *al-Kāfi* is subject to dispute depending on how you count.⁷⁵ Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d. 1186/1772) quotes

⁷³ Hence ‘Abdullāh al-Afandī (d. 1130/1717) says in Khalīl’s entry: “Amongst his stranger opinions is the position that *al-Kāfi* as a whole was looked over by the *ṣāḥib* (i.e. twelfth Imam) who deemed it good ... and that all its reports are true and obligatory to act upon”; see ‘Abdullāh al-Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-‘ulamā’ wa ḥiyāḍ al-fuḍalā’* (Manshūrāt Maktabat Ayatollah al-‘Uzmā al-Mar‘ashī al-Najafī: 1982), 2:261.

⁷⁴ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Mir‘āt al-‘uqūl fī sharḥ akhbār āl al-rasūl* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya: 1983), 1:22.

⁷⁵ The latest edition of *al-Kāfi* by the Dār al-Ḥadīth, which runs to 15 volumes, puts the number at 15,413.

an unnamed scholar⁷⁶ giving the following breakdown “as per the terminology coined by the *muta’akhhirīn*”:⁷⁷

قَالَ بَعْضُ مَشَائِخِنَا الْمُتَأَخِّرِينَ: «أَمَّا الْكَافِي فَجَمِيعُ أَحَادِيثِهِ حُصِرَتْ فِي سِتَّةِ عَشَرَ أَلْفَ حَدِيثٍ وَمِائَةٍ وَتِسْعَةٍ وَتِسْعِينَ حَدِيثًا، وَالصَّحِيحُ مِنْهَا بِاصْطِلَاحِ مَنْ تَأَخَّرَ خَمْسَةُ آلَافٍ وَائْتِنَانٍ وَسَبْعُونَ حَدِيثًا، وَالْحُسْنُ مِائَةٌ وَأَرْبَعَةٌ وَأَرْبَعُونَ حَدِيثًا، وَالْمَوْثِقُ مِائَةٌ وَأَلْفُ حَدِيثٍ وَتَمَانِيَةٌ وَعَشْرُ حَدِيثًا وَالْقَوِيُّ مِنْهَا ائْتِنَانٍ وَثَلَاثُمِائَةٍ حَدِيثٍ وَالضَّعِيفُ مِنْهَا أَرْبَعُمِائَةٍ وَتِسْعَةُ آلَافٍ وَخَمْسَةٌ وَتَمَانُونَ حَدِيثًا».

As for *al-Kāfi*—the total number of reports in it comes to 16,199 reports: 5072 are *ṣaḥīḥ*, 144 are *ḥasan*, 1118 are *muwaththaq*, 302 are *qawī* and 9485 are *ḍa‘īf*.

This would mean that only about 31 percent of the book is *ṣaḥīḥ* and approximately 59 percent of the book is weak. However, this line of attack is borne out of ignorance as to the difference between *ṣaḥīḥ* as it has come to be defined by the *muta’akhhirīn* and the way it was understood by the *qudamā’* such as al-Kulaynī.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ This is most likely Shahīd al-Thānī (d. 965/1557 or 966/1558).

⁷⁷ Yūsuf b. Aḥmad al-Baḥrānī, *Lu’lu’at al-Baḥrayn fī l-ijāzāt wa tarājim rijāl al-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (Maktabat Fakhrāwī: 2008), 376–377. If you add these numbers together, the total is not 16,121 not 16,199. Āqā Buzurg al-Tihrānī (d. 1970) reproduces the same count but with an error in the number of *muwaththaq* which is given as 178 instead of 1118; see Muḥammad Muḥsin al-Tihrānī, *al-Dharī‘a ilā taṣānīf al-Shī‘a* (Dār Al-Adwā’: 1983), 17:245.

⁷⁸ In the opinion of this present work’s author, the era of al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) can be considered to be the boundary-marker between the age of the *qudamā’* (early scholars) and the *muta’akhhirīn* (later scholars). This is for many reasons, but chief among them is that those who came after al-Ṭūsī do not have independent routes to earlier material except predominantly via al-Ṭūsī himself.

The modern definition,⁷⁹ which is highly specific and based solely on studying the narrators in the chain of a report, is anachronistically back-projected to a period before it was in use.⁸⁰ A *ṣaḥīḥ* report for the *qudamā'* (early scholars)—according to later reconstruction—was any report that they were confident originated from the Imam.⁸¹ This could be a report of a *thiqa* narrator (in accordance with the modern definition), but also a report that is weak in chain but whose meaning is established by corroboration (numerous reports saying the same thing), or even the report of narrator about whom nothing good or bad is known (*majhūl*) provided there is no disqualifying factor.⁸²

Put another way, the technical definition of *ṣaḥīḥ* as applied by later scholars is merely a subset of how the earlier scholars applied it. The glaring categorical error of judging an early book with a standard developed later should be obvious.

Another problem with the modern four-fold classification is that a lot of diverse phenomena is subsumed under the single category of *ḍaʿīf* without distinguishing between different shades of weakness. Thus, both the outright *mawḍūʿ* (fabrication) and a report with a single

⁷⁹ Fully connected chain of consisting of solely *thiqa* and Imāmī narrators.

⁸⁰ The origins of the modern four-fold classification of *ḥadīth* can be traced back to Aḥmad b. Ṭāwūs (d. 673/1274) and his student ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325).

⁸¹ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-ʿĀmilī, *Mashriq al-shamsayn wa iksīr al-saʿadatayn*, ed. Mahdī al-Rajāʿī (Muʿassasat al-Ṭabʿ wa-l-Nashr al-Tābiʿa li-l-Āstāna al-Raḍawīyya al-Muqaddasa: 2008), 26; Ḥasan b. Zayn al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī, *Muntaqā l-jumān fi l-aḥādīth al-ṣiḥāḥ wa-l-ḥisān*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Muʿassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī: 1983), 14–15.

⁸² Muḥammad Taqī al-Tustarī, who was the most original *ḥadīth* scholar of his generation in the opinion of this present work's author, says: "So we see that the *qudamā'*, and just as they act upon (purport of) the report whose transmitters are praise-worthy, also act upon the report whose transmitters are not weakened. It is only the reports of those censured which they repudiate"; see al-Tustarī, *Qāmūs al-Rijāl*, 1:38.

majhūl narrator technically fall under the same category.

A large percentage of the 9000 or so weak-by-chain reports in *al-Kāfi* are labelled so merely because they contain one or two *majhūl* narrators in the chain with the chain being perfectly fine otherwise. These are narrators who may not have been declared *thiqa* but nothing negative is known about them. Many of them would have been reporting what they heard accurately and there are other ways of gaining confidence in their reports.

Consequently, when the reports on the same topic and those placed in the same chapter by al-Kulaynī are studied together, instead of looking at each report in isolation, one finds that a lot of the *ḍaʿīf* reports are corroborated by other reports in the chapter or share the same meaning with *ṣaḥīḥ* reports, altering the statistics significantly.⁸³

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⁸³ Consider a scenario where a chapter in *al-Kāfi* has a total of 7 reports. 2 reports are *ṣaḥīḥ* per the modern definition and 5 are weak-in-chain, but all 7 reports are essentially saying the same thing. How many *ṣaḥīḥ* reports do we have? A count which only looks at each report in isolation says 2 whereas in reality it is 7.

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