Hadith

A hadith (/ˈhædɪθ/ or /haːˈdiːθ/ Arabic: حَدِيث hadīth, plural: āhādīth) is one of various reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The term comes from Arabic meaning a “report”, “account” or “narrative”. Hadith are second only to the Qur'an in Islam and regarded as important tools for understanding the Qur'an and commentaries (tafsir) written on it. Some important elements of traditional Islam, such as the five salat prayers, are mentioned in hadith.

The hadith literature is based on spoken reports that were in circulation in society after the death of Muhammad. Unlike the Qur’an the hadiths were not quickly and concisely compiled during and immediately after Muhammad’s life. Hadith were evaluated and gathered into large collections during the 8th and 9th centuries, generations after the death of Muhammad, after the end of the era of the “rightful” Rashidun Caliphate, over 1,000 km (620 mi) from where Muhammad lived.

Each hadith consists of two parts, the isnad (Arabic: ‘support’), or the chain of transmitters through which a scholar traced the matn, or text, of a hadith back to the Prophet. Individual hadith are classified by Muslim clerics and jurists as sahih (“authentic”), hasan (“good”) or da’if (“weak”). However, there is no overall agreement: different groups and different individual scholars may classify a hadith differently.

Different branches of Islam (Sunni, Shia, Ibadi) refer to different collections of hadith, and the relatively small sect of Quranists reject the authority of any of the hadith collections.

See also: Categories of Ahadith

3 Components

The two major aspects of a hadith are the text of the report (the matn), which contains the actual narrative, and the chain of narrators (the isnad), which documents the route by which the report has been transmitted. The isnad was an effort to document that a hadith had actually come from Muhammad, and Muslim scholars from the eighth century until today have never ceased repeating the mantra “The isnad is part of the religion - if not for the isnad, whoever wanted could say whatever they wanted.”

The isnad means literally ‘support’, and it is so named due to the reliance of the hadith specialists upon it in determining the authenticity or weakness of a hadith. The isnad consists of a chronological list of the narrators, each mentioning the one from whom they heard the hadith, until mentioning the originator of the matn along with the matn itself.

The first people to hear hadith were the companions who preserved it and then conveyed it to those after them. Then the generation following them received it, thus conveying it to those after them and so on. So a companion would say, “I heard the Prophet say such and such.” The Follower would then say, “I heard a companion say, ‘I heard the Prophet.’” The one after him would then say, “I heard someone say, ‘I heard a Companion say, ‘I heard the Prophet...’” and so on.
4 Different schools

Different branches of Islam refer to different collections of hadith, though the same incident may be found in hadith in different collections:

- In the Sunni branch of Islam, the canonical hadith collections are *the six books*, of which Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim generally have the highest status. The other books of hadith are Sunan Abu Dawood, Jami’ at-Tirmidhi, Al-Sunan al-Sughra and Sunan ibn Majah. However the Malikis, one of the four Sunni “schools of thought” (*madhhabs*), traditionally reject Sunan ibn Majah and assert the canonical status of Muwatta Imam Malik.

- In the Shi’a branch of Islam, the canonical hadith collections are *the Four Books*: Kitab al-Kafi, Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih, Tahdhib al-Ahkam, and Al-Istibsar.

- In the Ibadi branch of Islam, the main canonical collection is the Taritib al-Musnad. This is an expansion of the earlier Jami Sahih collection, which retains canonical status in its own right.

- The Ahmadiyya sect generally rely on the Sunni canons.

Some minor groups, collectively known as Quranists, reject the authority of the hadith collections.\[10\][11]

The hadith also had a profound and controversial influence on moulding the commentaries (*tafsir*) of the Quran. The earliest commentary of the Quran known as Tafsir Ibn Abbas is sometimes attributed to the companion Ibn Abbas, but this is rejected by scholars. The hadith were used in forming the basis of Shariah. Much of early Islamic history available today is also based on the hadith and is challenged for lack of basis in primary source material and contradictions based on secondary material available.

5 History, tradition and usage

5.1 History

Traditions of the life of Muhammad and the early history of Islam were passed down mostly orally for more than a hundred years after Muhammad’s death in AD 632. Muslim historians say that Caliph Uthman ibn Affan (the third khalifa (caliph) of the Rashidun Empire, or third successor of Muhammad, who had formerly been Muhammad’s secretary), is generally believed to urge Muslims to record the hadith just as Muhammad suggested to some of his followers to write down his words and actions.\[20\][21]

Uthman’s labours were cut short by his assassination, at the hands of agrieved soldiers, in 656. No sources survive directly from this period so we are dependent on what later writers tell us about this period.\[22\]

According to British historian of Arab world Alfred Guillaume, it is “certain” that “several small collections” of hadith were “assembled in Umayyad times.”\[23\]

In 851 the rationalist Mu’tazila school of thought fell from favor in the Abbasid Caliphate. The Mu’tazila, for whom the “judge of truth ... was human reason,”\[24\] had clashed with traditionists who looked to the literal meaning of the Quran and hadith for truth. While the Quran had been officially compiled and approved, hadiths had not. One result was the number of hadiths began “multiplying in suspiciously direct correlation to their utility” to the quoter of the hadith (Traditionists quoted hadith warning against listening to human opinion instead of Shariah; Hanafites quoted a hadith stating that “In my community there will rise a man called Abu Hanifa [the Hanafite founder] who will be its guiding light”. In fact one agreed upon hadith warned that, “There will be forgers, liars who will bring you hadiths which neither you nor your forefathers have heard, Beware of them.” In addition the number of hadith grew enormously. While Malik ibn Anas had attributed just 1720 statements or deeds to the Muhammad, it was no longer unusual to find people who had collected a hundred times that number of hadith.

Faced with a huge corpus of miscellaneous traditions supported differing views on a variety of controversial matters—some of them flatly contradicting each other—Islamic scholars of the Abbasid sought to authenticate hadith. Scholars had to decide which hadith were to be trusted as authentic and which had been invented for political or theological purposes. To do this, they used a number of techniques which Muslims now call the science of hadith,\[25\]

5.2 Shia and Sunni textual traditions

Sunni and Shia hadith collections differ because scholars from the two traditions differ as to the reliability of the narrators and transmitters. Narrators who took the side of Abu Bakr and Umar rather than Ali, in the disputes over leadership that followed the death of Muhammad, are seen as unreliable by the Shia; narrations sourced to Ali and the family of Muhammad, and to their supporters, are preferred. Sunni scholars put trust in narrators, such as Aisha, whom Shia reject. Differences in hadith collections have contributed to differences in worship practices and shari’a law and have hardened the dividing line between the two traditions.

5.2.1 Extent and nature in the Sunni tradition

In the Sunni tradition, the number of such texts is ten thousand plus or minus a few thousand.\[26\] But if, say,
ten companions record a text reporting a single incident in the life of the prophet, hadith scholars can count this as ten hadiths. So Musnad Ahmad, for example, has over 30,000 hadiths—but this count includes texts that are repeated in order to record slight variations within the text or within the chains of narrations. Identifying the narrators of the various texts, comparing their narrations of the same texts to identify both the soundest reporting of a text and the reporters who are most sound in their reporting occupied experts of hadith throughout the 2nd century. In the 3rd century of Islam (from 225/840 to about 275/889), hadith experts composed brief works recording a selection of about two- to five-thousand such texts which they felt to have been most soundly documented or most widely referred to in the Muslim scholarly community.[28] The 4th and 5th century saw these six works being commented on quite widely. This auxiliary literature has contributed to making their study the place of departure for any serious study of hadith. In addition, Bukhari and Muslim in particular, claimed that they were collecting only the soundest of sound hadiths. These later scholars tested their claims and agreed to them, so that today, they are considered the most reliable collections of hadith.[29] Toward the end of the 5th century, Ibn al-Qaisarani formally standardized the Sunni canon into six pivotal works, a delineation which remains to this day.[30][31][32]

Over the centuries, several different categories of collections came into existence. Some are more general, like the *musannaf*, the *muṣannaf*, and the *jāmiʿ*, and some more specific, either characterized by the topics treated, like the *sunan* (restricted to legal-liturgical traditions), or by its composition, like the *arbaʿ īnīyāt* (collections of forty hadiths).[33]

5.3 Modern usage

The mainstream sects consider hadith to be essential supplements to, and clarifications of, the Quran, Islam’s holy book, as well as for clarifying issues pertaining to Islamic jurisprudence. Ibn al-Salah, a hadith specialist, described the relationship between hadith and other aspect of the religion by saying: “It is the science most pervasive in respect to the other sciences in their various branches, in particular to jurisprudence being the most important of them.”[36] “The intended meaning of ‘other sciences’ here are those pertaining to religion,” explains Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, “Quranic exegesis, hadith, and jurisprudence. The science of hadith became the most pervasive due to the need displayed by each of these three sciences. The need hadith has of its science is apparent. As for Quranic exegesis, then the preferred manner of explaining the speech of God is by means of what has been accepted as a statement of Muhammad. The one looking to this is in need of distinguishing the acceptable from the unacceptable. Regarding jurisprudence, then the jurist is in need of citing as an evidence the acceptable to the exception of the later, something only possible utilizing the science of hadith.”[34]

6 Studies

Main article: Hadith studies

Hadith studies use a number of methods of evaluation developed by early Muslim scholars in determining the veracity of reports attributed to Muhammad. This is achieved by analyzing the text of the report, the scale of the report’s transmission, the routes through which the report was transmitted, and the individual narrators involved in its transmission. On the basis of these criteria, various classifications were devised for hadith. The earliest comprehensive work in hadith studies was Abu Muhammad al-Ramahurmuzi’s *al-Muhaddith al-Fasih*, while another significant work was al-Hakim al-Naysaburi’s *Maʿrifat ʿulum al-hadith*. Ibn al-Salah’s *Ulum al-hadith* is considered the standard classical reference on hadith studies.[15]

6.1 Terminology: admissible and inadmissible hadiths

Main article: Hadith terminology

By means of hadith terminology, hadith are categorized as *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound, authentic), *daʿīf* (weak), or *mawdūʿ* (fabricated). Other classifications used also include: *ḥasan* (good), which refers to an otherwise *ṣaḥīḥ* report suffering from minor deficiency, or a weak report strengthened due to numerous other corroborating reports; and
munkar (denounced) which is a report that is rejected due to the presence of an unreliable transmitter contradicting another more reliable narrator.[17] Both sahih and hasan reports are considered acceptable for usage in Islamic legal discourse. Classifications of hadith may also be based upon the scale of transmission. Reports that pass through many reliable transmitters at each point in the isnad up until their collection and transcription are known as mutawātir. These reports are considered the most authoritative as they pass through so many different routes that collusion between all of the transmitters becomes an impossibility. Reports not meeting this standard are known as aahad, and are of several different types.[15]

Some hadith are also called hadith qudsi (sacred hadith), like Ziyarat Ashura. It is a sub-category of hadith which some Muslims regard as the words of God (Arabic: Allah). According to as-Sayyid ash-Sharif al-Jurjani, the hadith qudsi differ from the Quran in that the former are “expressed in Muhammad’s words”, whereas the latter are the "direct words of God". However, note that a hadith qudsi is not necessarily sahih, it can also be da'if or even mawdu'.[38]

An example of a hadith qudsi is the hadith of Abu Hurairah who said that Muhammad said:

When God decreed the Creation He pledged Himself by writing in His book which is laid down with Him: My mercy prevails over My wrath.[39]

6.2 Biographical evaluation

Main article: Biographical evaluation

Another area of focus in the study of hadith is biographical analysis (‘ilm al-rijāl, lit. “science of people”), in which details about the transmitter are scrutinized. This includes analyzing their date and place of birth; familial connections; teachers and students; religiosity; moral behaviour; literary output; their travels; as well as their date of death. Based upon these criteria, the reliability (thiqāt) of the transmitter is assessed. Also determined is whether the individual was actually able to transmit the report, which is deduced from their contemporaneity and geographical proximity with the other transmitters in the chain.[40] Examples of biographical dictionaries include: Abd al-Ghani al-Maqdisi’s Al-Kamal fi Asma’ al-Rijāl, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani’s Tahdhib al-Tahdhib and al-Dhahabi’s Tadhkirat al-huffaz.[41]

7 Criticism

Main article: Criticism of Hadith

The major points of criticism of the Hadith literature is based in questions regarding its authenticity,[42] as well as theological/philosophical critiques. Muslim scholars questioned the Hadith literature throughout its history, with Western academics also becoming active in the field later on.

8 See also

- Prophetic biography
- List of hadith authors and commentators

9 References


Ibn al-Rijal wa Ahmiyah, by Mualami, p. 16, Dar al-Rayah.

^ Tirmidhi, “IIm,” 12.

Collected in the Musnad of Ahmad (10/15-6 6510 and also nos. 6930, 7017 and 1720), Sunan Abu Dawud (Mukhtasar Sunan Abu Dawud (5/2463-499) and elsewhere.

Roman, provincial and Islamic law, Patricia Crone, p2


Islam – the Straight Path, John Eposito, p.81


The earliest book, Bukhari’s Sahih was composed by 225/840 since he states that he spent sixteen years composing it (Hady al-Sari, introduction to Fath al-Bari, p. 489, Lahore: Dar Nasir al-Khatib al-Islamiya, 1981/1401) and also that he showed it to Yahya ibn Ma’in (p. 8, ibid.) who died in 233. Nas’a, the last to die of the authors of the six books, died in 303/915. He probably completed this work a few decades before his death: by 275 or so.

Counting multiple narrations of the same texts as a single text, the number of hadiths each author has recorded roughly as follows: Bukhari (as in Zabidi’s Mukhtasar of Bukhari’s book) 2134, Muslim (as in Mundhiri’s Mukhtasar of Muslim’s book) 2200, Tirmidhi 4000, Abu Dawud 4000, Nasa’i 4800, Ibn Majah 4300. There is considerable overlap amongst the six books so that Ibn al-Athir’s Jami’ al-Usul, which gathers together the hadiths texts of all six books deleting repeated texts, has about 9500 hadiths.


Ibn Khallikan


Islam – the Straight Path, John Eposito, p.81

See:

- “Hadith,” Encyclopedia of Islam Online;

“Qu’est-ce que le hadith Qudsi ?” aslamma.info.

Related by al-Bukhari, Muslim, an-Nasa’i and Ibn Majah.

Berg (2000) p. 8

See:

- Robinson (2003) pp. 69–70;
- Lucas (2004) p. 15


10 Bibliography


11 Further reading


• Fred M. Donner, Narratives of Islamic Origins (1998)


12 External links

• Importance of hadith
• Hadith – Search by keyword and find hadith by narrator
• Hadith by Narrator – Find hadith by narrators
• Hadith Advanced Search – Search by keyword
• Hadith app, All 13 ahadith books
• "Hadith”. New International Encyclopedia. 1905.
• "Hadis”. Encyclopedia Americana. 1920.
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