

The HADITH - How it was Collected and Compiled

By Dr. Mohammad Shafi

Based on Lectures given at the Dar al Islam Teachers' Institutes

SOME DEFINITIONS

Al-Qur'an: The book that consists entirely of the words claimed by the Prophet to be the words of God as revealed to him. (When we just say The Prophet, we mean The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.) The Qur'an comes to us through multiple independent sources and its entire text is fully and rigorously authenticated. All Muslims, and most orientalist, agree on the text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the undisputed primary source of Islamic teachings and Guidance.

Hadith: The word Hadith means news, story, communication, conversation, report. In the Islamic religious context, it means an individual report of an action, instruction or saying, of the Prophet, or his approval, disapproval, or silence (tacit approval) regarding some matter or action. By its very nature, the reliability of Hadith reports is dependant on the understanding by the reporter of the context and of the words and their applicability. Regardless of the complexity, however, Hadith is the second primary source of Islamic guidance.

Sunnah: is the word used for the normative teachings of the Prophet, as shown by his practice as a Prophet, or his specific instructions and guidance on an issue or a situation. One finds the Sunnah through the study and analysis of the Hadith literature.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE HADITH

As indicated above, the Hadith is the second primary source of guidance in Islam. It is unanimously agreed by Muslims that the authority of the Hadith is second only to that of the Qur'an. Since the Hadith relates things on the authority of the Prophet, and the Prophet is commissioned by God to promulgate the teachings that came through him, its authority derives from that of the Prophet himself. Professor Jackson described this very succinctly, in a lecture at one of these Dar al Islam Teachers' Institutes:

The Prophet, being the recipient and therefore the guardian of the Revelation, was therefore guided. It was his charge to clarify the Revelation through his conduct, his words, and his tacit approval. In terms of his authority, the two types of revelation are equal, though ontologically they are distinct. If you were to go to the prophet and ask him, "O Messenger of Allah, is it permissible for me to do X", he might answer by reciting verses of Qur'an that apply to your question, or he might simply say yes it is permissible or no, it is not. Either way the answer you receive is equally authoritative.

The Qur'an itself confers this authority on the Prophet and all other prophets before him.

- And we have not sent a messenger but to be obeyed, with the leave of God. (Surah 4, Ayah 64)

- Say “obey Allah and the Messenger”; then if you turn away, indeed Allah does not love those who reject faith. (Surah 3, Ayah 32)
- And obey God and the Messenger so that you may have Mercy on you. (Surah 3 Ayah 132)
- O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those among you with authority; but if you have a dispute concerning some matter, refer it to God and the Messenger if you are (truly) believers in God and the Day of Judgment. This is best and the most suitable of the alternatives. (Surah 4, Ayah 59).

There are many other similar Ayahs.

The Prophet’s practice and normative instructions are crucial for being a Muslim and living Islam. It is the Prophet’s example that teaches the Muslims how to perform even the most basic duty of Salat (the ritual Prayer, required five times a day). The Qur’an mentions standing, bowing, and prostrating, but it is the Prophet’s consistent practice and teachings that provide the details.

THE COMPANIONS LEARNING FROM THE PROPHET

The Prophet was a very patient and considerate teacher. God had said that He does not want matters to be difficult but to be easy. The Companions were very watchful of every move and word of the Prophet; even his most private life was observed and reported by his wives. People observed his actions and practices; they would memorize what he said and some would write down what they saw and heard. Everyone would practice what they learned, and they would teach each other and correct each other.

The Prophet was careful to vary many of his practices so they would not become normative; he would emphasize the difference between his role as a Messenger of God and his thoughts and actions as an ordinary human being. The companions were not passive learners either. It was not uncommon for a Companion to say: “O Messenger of God, may my mother and father be sacrificed for you, is this from God or from your opinion”? If he said it is from God, that would end the dialogue; but if he said it is his opinion, the Companion might say, “I have a different opinion”-- notice, not a better opinion, but a different one. And it was not uncommon for the Prophet to go along with the opinions of others, sometimes against his own better judgment. The battle of the ditch, for example, was fought within the confines of the city because the youth felt that leaving the city would be seen by the enemy as a sign of weakness. The Prophet did not prefer this option but went along with it. A Persian Companion told them about digging a ditch to defend the city.

God held the Prophet to a very high standard to assure that no misinterpretations of his actions or word occur. Sometimes a revelation would come to contradict the Prophet or even rebuke him, sometimes on a seemingly minor matter. For example: a poor man came to the Prophet when he was talking to, and seeking the support of, some rich and powerful men. The Prophet did not acknowledge the presence of the poor man. A revelation came rebuking him on this lack of paying more attention to the powerful when the poor man was trying to get his attention. The

Companions were so keen on learning all about the Prophet that the very busy ones had formed cooperative groups so at least one member would be in daily attendance in the Prophet's company; those who attended would then meet others to fill them in.

MODES OF TRANSMISSION OF HADITH

Things were relatively simple during the Prophet's lifetime. If someone wanted guidance concerning an issue, for which no guidance was known to him, he would go to the Prophet and ask. (It was not uncommon to ask others who had the reputation for knowledge or were known for the acuity of their thought). The Prophet may provide an answer, or refer them to someone else, in order to establish the habit and practice of mutual consultation.

After the Prophet's death, this avenue had to be replaced by referring to his Hadith. As the community grew out of Madinah, and the time span increased, more information had to be provided. How did the Hadith get to the person quoting it? An elaborate Science was created to authenticate the Hadith and establish a level of authenticity for each report.

It should be noted that there were recordings of the Hadith in the Prophet's time. People who reported large numbers of Hadith were more likely to have written down things and also to have been in the company of the Prophet more frequently. For example, the most prolific Companion is a person named Abu Huraira. Abu Huraira lived to a ripe old age so many next generation people met him and spoke with him. It is said that he reported 5,374 Hadith. (A single issue reported through multiple chains of reporters would be counted as different Hadith by most counters. If such reports are unduplicated, Abu Huraira's reports are still about 1236.) The second most quoted Companion is Abdullah ibn `Umar with 2,630 Hadith. They are followed by Anas ibn Malik with 2,286 and `A'isha (the Prophet's wife) with 2,210. Interestingly, the first four Khalifa reported relatively few Hadith: a very small number from the first Khalifa, Abu Bakr; 537 from `Umar ibn al-Khattab; a tiny number from `Uthman ibn `Affan, and only 536 from the fourth Khalifa, `Ali Ibn Abu Talib.

When the chains got longer, and reporters further removed, the collectors and compilers used careful words to describe the mode of transmission. For example, distinct words are used to describe the following situations:

- Sima` : Readings by teachers to students.
- `Arad: Readings by students to teachers.
- `Ijazah: Permit someone to transmit a Hadith (or book); report "on the authority of" the scholar.
- Munadalah: To hand someone written material.
- Kitabah: To write Hadith for someone
- `Ilaam: To inform someone that informer has the permission to transmit certain material.
- Wasiyyah: To entrust someone his books
- Wajada: To discover some book or written records

As can be seen, the Hadith methodology and the system became very elaborate as the times became further removed from the Prophet. The Muslims never took this task lightly. The Qur'an has been taken so seriously that no spelling mistakes, or even punctuation mistakes, are accepted in the text; every letter is counted and no additions or subtractions would go undetected. The Hadith, by its very nature cannot be as protected as the Qur'an, but it is still a very rigorous discipline. When you are thinking of transmission, think of the chain first.

SILSILAH: THE CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION

The Muslims in general and the experts of the science of Hadith in particular, insisted on knowing the source of information. Who were the individuals in the chain of reporting whatever it is they were recording? As the years go by, the number of people in the chain of reporting an event or a statement increases geometrically. In addition, the diversity of the first generation of reporters becomes more diverse. Among the first generation itself, some reporters would have good memories, others won't. Some would have better understanding and comprehension than others and some would better understand the context than others. Each of these people in the chain interacts with a diverse group of the next generation. By the third generation, we have tens of thousands of people in the process. The possibility of fabricators increases. Political and tribal agendas come into play. The scholars had to devise methodologies to deal with the challenge of discovering the various capabilities of reporters, and of identifying fabricators and people with special tribal, ethnic, or sectarian agendas. Thus was born the next element of authenticating Hadith; the Isnad.

ISNAD: THE LEVEL OF AUTHORITY OF INDIVIDUALS IN THE CHAIN

Muslim scholars developed the most rigorous testing techniques for dealing with the level of authenticity of recording what we would call history. They were engaged in what is textual criticism in the modern sense. When a given Hadith is looked at, a list of all the reporters in the chains through which it has been transmitted is made; then the chains are compared. A new science of Asma Al-Rijal, was developed which documented a biography of each individual involved in the chains. Such biographies were developed for tens of thousands of people. The information included the place and time of birth and death of each reporter. They recorded information on their education, their teachers, their truthfulness, the people they had met and the level of their interaction. How was their level of comprehension? Did they have a tendency to be unnecessarily talkative? How meticulous were they in their reporting? What, and when did they transmit their Hadith, and how does that relate to their characteristics? This information was available to all scholars engaged in the science of Hadith.

Having reliable people in the chain was not enough. It was required that Hadith on matters of importance come through a number of independent chains. If all the chains of a particular Hadith go through a single individual somewhere in the middle of the chain, it is called "ahad", a singular Hadith, and is not acceptable for important purposes by all schools of law. For 'ahad, the text itself becomes much more significant. The scholars also pay attention to the site and situation of an incident. If something occurred in public, then one would expect many people to

report it. Report of a miraculous event required, in nearly all cases, that it be reported by a crowd--which is defined as a minimum of twelve people. The collectors and documenters of Hadith went through this process of classifying each Hadith and scores of other reviewers later went through independent analyses of each Hadith in each of the collections.

MATAN: THE TEXT

After the isnad work is done and the Hadith falls within a certain level of classification, its text is run through various tests. The first is to see if the text in any way contradicts the Qur'an. If so, the Hadith is rejected. That does not mean it is false--perhaps the reporter misunderstood the situation. If it is not against Qur'an, does it contradict other Hadith that are reliable? If so, at what level are the differences? Are there different shades of application? Or, should one or the other or both be rejected? These types of tests are followed by tests against logic rules. Does it really make sense? Tests of applied logic and reasonableness based in spirituality and religion may be needed. Some schools of Hadith methodology apply as many as sixteen separate tests. For example, the rules would reject a report about the importance of an individual (or individuals) which is transmitted only through their supporters or family, and which is not supported by reports from other independent channels. Similarly rejected would be a report that seems to be an exaggeration, unless strongly corroborated by multiple reliable sources.

APPLICATION OF THE METHODOLOGY: SOME EXAMPLES

- There is a report from a very strong source, "Reported by `Umar". This is `Umar Ibn al Khattab, the one about whom the Prophet said that if there was going to be a prophet after me, it would be `Umar. The same `Umar who became the second Caliph and who is considered, by the Hanafi scholars, to be one of the four most profound thinkers of the Muslim world community. His son, Abdullah (considered to be a great scholar in his own right), reports his father saying that he heard the Prophet say that "the dead person is punished if his family mourns loudly and cries (in the manner of the time of ignorance) at his grave." Upon hearing this report, the much younger 'A'isha, the widow of the Prophet, flatly rejects it out of hand. The basis she gives for her rejection is that the report goes against the Ayah of the Qur'an: "and no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another" (Syrah 35, beginning of Ayah 18). (Translation Note: The bearer in the Ayah is feminine and refers to the Nafs which means a person but translated by some as soul.)
- The husband of Fatima bint Qais had pronounced three concurrent divorces on her, a practice discouraged by the Qur'an. She claimed that her ex-husband then refused to give her maintenance provisions. She reported, during the time of the second Caliph, that she came to the Prophet and he refused to award her maintenance from her husband. When the Caliph `Umar heard this, he rejected it on the authority of the Qur'an, quoting parts of two Ayahs. The translation of the first quote (part of Ayah 236 of Surah 2) is as follows: "...but bestow upon them allowances, the wealthy according to their means and the poor according to their means, as commonly known to be reasonable...". Translation

of the second quote (part of Ayah 1 of Surah 65) is: "...do not expel them from their houses...". The first quote, therefore, indicating that the divorced women was entitled to expenses and the second indicating that she was entitled to staying in the house, until the end of the prescribed period of finalizing the divorce.

CLASSIFICATION

After analysis and critiques, each Hadith is classified into one of several categories. Some are classified as sahih (rigorously authentic); others are classified as hasan (good), gharib (acceptable but poor), maudu` (partially manufactured), batil (invalid), etc. A Hadith that has come through many reliable chains and accepted by scholars at the highest level of authenticity may be called Mutawatir, (successively fully authenticated), and considered unassailably applicable. Different scholars may classify the same Hadith differently based on their analyses and critique. A Hadith is classified differently by different experts mainly because of the reliability ratings they assign to the reporters in the chain.

Scholars classify each reporter in the chain into one of twelve different levels of reliability. Bukhari accepts reports from only the top two levels; some accept reports from the top three levels, others use reports from various other levels. The science of Hadith is thus not a simple matter of quoting a Hadith but is one that requires knowing and understanding the details of the text, the context, and the characteristics of each person in all the chains of narration. The Sciences of Jurisprudence require even a greater level of scrutiny and analysis.

MAJOR HADITH COLLECTIONS

Many early collections were fragmentary and were undertaken for special purposes. Most survived as parts of legal and spiritual arguments or were incorporated in the more comprehensive collections. Major, systematic collections were made toward the end of the second and the beginning of the third Hijri centuries:

1. The Mu'watta of Malik is the earliest. He was born in Madinah: B. 93H D 179H
2. The Musnad of Ahmad is next. He was born in Basra: B. 164H D 241H

But the "Sihah Sittah" (literally, "the most rigorously authenticated six") are:

1. The Sahih of Bukhari. He was born in Bukhara: B. 194H D 256H
2. The Sahih of Muslim. He was born in Nishapur: B. 204H D 261H
3. The Sunan of Abu Dawud. He was born in Sajistan: B. 202H D 275H
4. The Sunan of Tirmidhi. He was born in Khurasan: B. 209H D 279H
5. The Sunan of An-Nisa'i. He was born in Khurasan: B. 214H D 303H
6. The Sunan of Ibn Majah: B. 209H D 273H

These above six are accepted by scholars as the six most reliable collections, the Sihah Sittah (the fully authenticated six collections). Without getting into technical details, it should be

pointed out that each of the six uses somewhat different tests for rigorous authentication. Because Bukhari is the most strict, the authenticity of his collection is accepted second only to that of the Qur'an. Muslim is next. A Hadith included in both has a higher authority than that of Bukhari alone and is usually described as "agreed upon". While the above six are considered "authenticated collections", analysts have identified some less reliable Hadith reports in the last two of the six. On the other hand, the Mu'atta of Malik has since been thoroughly analyzed and is considered to contain fully reliable Hadith reports. But the Mu'atta was not included in the Sihah because it does not list the details of the chain of narration, requirements that were made mandatory by the scholars after the death of Malik.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

From a partial transcript of a talk given by Dr. Sherman Jackson at the Dar Al Islam Teachers Institute, August 4, 1997.

Question: Do the Shi'ites consider these six collections to be authoritative?

Answer: The Shi'ites have their own collections of Hadith. In addition to the Hadith of the Prophet, the Shi'ites, consider the statements of the twelve Imams to be authoritative for Shi'ites.

Question: Are the differences--errr-- contradictions? How can Hadith and Qur'an be equally authoritative when two Hadith (sic) may contradict each other?

Answer: In a case where there are two contradictory Hadith, there may be a case of abrogation. For example, when the Prophet first moved to Madinah he was praying in the direction of Jerusalem; then later he began to pray in the direction of Makkah, which abrogated the previous directive. So it is necessary to know the chronology and other circumstances. One cannot simply take a single Hadith from a collection and base a conclusion on it.

Question: But if X is a Hadith, then it has the same authority as the Qur'an, right?

Answer: Potentially. It is possible that there is a Hadith that is sound, but because it is narrated by only a single source it isn't used by scholars as an equal source.

Question: But these compilers were all men. Ideas have changed.

Answer: The Prophet was an Arab, but if one accepts that he is a Prophet, then he is a recipient of the Revelation and is, therefore, transcendent of a particular society. The fact that the compilers are men confers on them no particular advantage. Aisha is in a much better position than Bukhari to have her voice heard because she can say, "I heard the Prophet say..." Imam as-Suyuti has a whole book on the issues about which Aisha corrected the other (male) Companions when they were incorrect. There are differences of interpretation. We know of differences of interpretation even in the lifetime of the Prophet: different groups of companions might interpret the words of the Prophet differently. But that is OK. There is a Hadith that tells us that when a scholar tries his utmost to understand a particular issue, if he is correct, he gets two rewards from God and if he is wrong, he gets one reward.