

Hadith Terminology

Hadith methodology and related sciences in this regard are essential tools to understand the prophetic traditions. Due to forgery in Hadith, the scholars produced methodology and rules to protect the authentic Sunnah and also clean the forged ones. They developed technical terms, names and phrases around this discipline. Without knowing these technical terms, it is impossible to understand the subject. As will be noted, matters pertaining to reliability of the chain of isnad (transmission) and also the meaning and linguistic clarity of hadith have moved from simple categories and classifications to shades of meaning and nuances of linguistic refinement over the various stages of development in hadith literature.⁴¹

Basic Terms

Technical terms in Hadith which developed over the history aim to provide the reader with an efficient knowledge to understand the prophetic traditions. For this purpose, brief information about some basic terms will be provided here.

Sunnah literally means a trodden path and it can be bad or good. *Bid'a* (innovation) is the opposite of Sunnah and is often used as something new and against the prophetic way. In *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Sunnah as being the second source of Islam is the words, practices and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which contain evidence to establish a ruling in Islam. In *fiqh*, Sunnah refers to the ruling of certain thing and indicates that such thing is not obligatory but recommended as practice of the Prophet. For Hadith scholars, Sunnah comprises all the sayings, acts and tacit approvals of the Prophet, his biography and description of personal attributes and events concerning his life.

Hadith literally means speech and new but in Islamic terminology it is the verbal carrier of Sunnah. Every Sunnah must be verified and established by an authentic hadith. For this reason, it has to be transmitted by a valid chain of transmission (*isnad*).

Khabar literally means a report and announcement of a factual event. In Hadith terminology it is a report that comes from others concerning the Prophet. It is different than Hadith because Hadith consists of what originates from the Prophet.

Another term which is close to Hadith and Sunnah in meaning is *athar*. It literally means imprint and relic that is inherited from the past. In Hadith terminology it includes all that is attributed to the Prophet, his Companions, Followers and other early scholars.

Hadith Qudsī is different than Hadith in terms of its rhetoric for the real speaker in this type of hadiths is God Himself yet the Prophet relates God's inspiration with his own words. This is different than the Qur'ān, because the words and meanings belong to God together in the Qur'ān, but in *Hadith Qudsī* meaning belongs to God and its wording to the Prophet. A total of just over 100 Qudsī hadith have been transmitted and from the viewpoint of its

⁴¹ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 56.

authenticity, hadith Qudsī is measured by the same criteria as any other hadith, and it may thus be classified as *sahīh* (authentic), *hasan* (fair) and *da'īf* (weak).⁴²

Sanad literally means a pillar or support and it refers to transmission chain in hadith starting from the Prophet to the last person in the chain. Another word '*isnad*' which is derived from the same root refers to the chain of transmission of hadith and it is used to determine hadith narrators in every generation. *Matn* literally means support and in Hadith it refers to the text or body of hadith.

Forgery in Hadith

Forgery in Hadith started at the early decades of the advent of Islam. There are different views concerning the exact time when the first forgery happened. Some hold that forgery started following the turmoil over the murder of the third caliph 'Uthman while others maintain that it emerged when political differences between the fourth caliph, 'Ali, and the governor of al-Sham, Mu'awiya, led to military confrontation and the division of Muslims into various factions. According to a third view, forgery in hadith started in the time of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph after the Prophet, when he waged a war against the apostates. But this view is very weak.

Hadith forgery can be analysed into two categories; deliberate forgery and unintentional fabrication due to error in reporting. Whether forgery happened intentionally or unintentionally the result is the same for in both cases they are abandoned.⁴³ There are several reasons to forge hadith intentionally and the first reason for it is that the followers of certain political groups aimed to credit or discredit leading political figures with exaggerated claims. Political differences between 'Ali and Abu Bakr, 'Ali and Mu'awiya, 'Ali and 'A'isha, between 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr and 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, and generally between the Umayyad and 'Abbasid were among the causes of hadith forgery.⁴⁴

The Kharijites did not fabricate hadith to promote their political views due to their belief that the perpetrator of a grave sin is no longer a Muslim. The enemies of Islam fabricated hadith to discredit Islam in the eyes of its followers. It has been reported that the enemies of Islam fabricated a total of 14,000 hadiths.⁴⁵ Racial, tribal and linguistic fanaticism is another reason which led some people to fabricate hadith on the superiority of Arabs over non-Arabs or on the superiority of other nations over the Arabs.

Another group who forged hadith was professional storytellers and preachers. They aimed to arouse an emotional response in the audience while delivering their speech in the mosques and for this purpose they made up stories. Juristic and theological differences caused some fanatics to fabricate hadiths to credit or discredit certain views. Another theme in hadith forgery is related to courtiers who fabricated hadith to please their kings and rulers. Some

⁴² Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 62.

⁴³ Azami, *Hadith Studies*, p. 69;

⁴⁴ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Al-Siba'ī, *Al-Sunnah*, p. 82.

wicked people forged hadith to sell their merchandise products such as food, beverages and clothes.

Some scholars collected the forged hadiths in separate works. For example, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597 H) wrote his book ‘al-Mawdu’at’, Suyūṭī (d. 911) wrote ‘Al-La’ali’ al-Masnu’a fī l-Ahadith al-Mawdu’a’ and al-Maqdisi wrote ‘Tadhkirat al-Mawdu’at’ in this field.

Hadith Criticism (*al-Jarh wa'l-Ta'dil*)

The Companions and the immediately following generations were meticulous in transmitting the hadiths. They showed the utmost care and exactness in separating sound hadiths from those that had been fabricated by memorizing them word for word, and then transmitting to the following generations in the most authentic ways.⁴⁶ One of the essential characters which Islam aims to establish in its followers’ hearts is truthfulness and the Companions were very strict in this matter. Moreover, the Prophet warned his community not to lie about him for any forgery in hadith may harm religion. Hence Sunnah is the second source of Islam it has to be established with the most authentic way and therefore the prophet paid great attention in this matter;

“Whoever relates from me falsely is a liar.”⁴⁷

“Those who lie about me should prepare their abodes in the Fire”⁴⁸

These types of warnings influenced the Companions and the next generations to be very careful in hadith transmission. For example, ‘Ali bin Abī Tālib, the fourth Caliph, used to say: “I fear to narrate a hadith from the Prophet so much that I would rather fall from Heaven than speak a lie on his behalf.”⁴⁹

Similarly, ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Mas‘ud was very careful in transmitting hadith. Whenever he was asked to report from the Prophet he would begin with the Messenger of God said and stopped and bowed his head, breathed deeply and unbuttoned his collar while his eyes filled with tears. After finishing the narration, he would add the expression “The Messenger of God said this or something like this, or something more or less like this”⁵⁰ just to be careful and not to lie about him.

‘Abd al-Rahman b. Abī Layla who met 500 Companions reports; “I was personally familiar with 120 Companions. Sometimes all of them were in the same mosque. When they were asked about something, each would wait for the other to answer. If they were asked to narrate a hadith, no one would dare to. Finally, one of them would place his trust in God and begin to

⁴⁶ Gulen, *Messenger of God*, 337.

⁴⁷ Muslim, *Saḥīḥ*, Muqaddima, 1.

⁴⁸ Bukhari, *Saḥīḥ*, ‘Ilm, 38.

⁴⁹ Abu Dāwud, *Sunan*, Sunnah, 28.

⁵⁰ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, Muqaddima, 3.

narrate. He would always add: ‘The Messenger said this, or something like this, or something more or less like this.’”⁵¹

Hence the matter is very sensitive some scholars hold that intentional propagation of lies in the name of hadith amounted to disbelief.⁵² When the Companions went to remote parts of the Islamic domain it was necessary to verify the authenticity of the hadiths and therefore the scholars began to address the problem by recourse to rigorous criticism of the reliability of the narrators of hadith and the textual accuracy of their reports. Consequently, hadith criticism (*al-jarh wa'l-ta'dil*) emerged as a separate branch of hadith studies. Many scholars produced works and contributed to the growth of literature in this field.⁵³ Hadith criticism is mainly concerning with the reliability or otherwise of the transmitters of hadith.

Yahya b. Ma'in (d. 233 H), Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 H) and 'Ali b. al-Madini (d. 234) were the early pioneers who wrote on the subject and then almost all the leading Imams of hadith including al-Bukhari (d. 256), Muslim, Abu Dāwud and al-Nasā'i have to their credit written one or more books on the biographies of hadith transmitters and their works and thus contributed to the development of *al-jarh wa'l-ta'dil* (hadith criticism) during the third century.⁵⁴ The first book of this genre was 'Ali ibn al-Madini's *Kitāb al-Ma'rifah al-Saḥābah* (The Book of Knowledge about the Companions). Among the most significant are the following: Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's *Al-Istiāb fī Ma'rifah al-Aṣḥāb* (The Comprehensive Book of Knowledge about the Companions), Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalani's *Al-Isāba fī Tamyīz al-Saḥābah* (Finding the Truth in Judging the Companions), Ibn al-Athīr's *Usd al-Ghāba* (The Lions of the Forest), Ibn Sa'd's *Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubra'* (a most comprehensive biographical dictionary of the leading Companions and of the Tabi'in scholars), and *Tārikh Ibn 'Asakir* (History by Ibn 'Asakir), *Tārikh al-Bukhari* (History by Bukhari) and Yahya ibn Ma'in's *Al-Tārikh al-Kabīr* (The Great History).⁵⁵

Ta'dil literally means to validate, refers to reliability and uprightness of hadith narrators after questioning them in regards to their character and knowledge. However, if evidence establishes that the transmitter is unreliable this is referred to as *al-jarh* which literally means wounding. From the view point of reliability hadith narrators are listed under six categories;

- The Companions (highest in reliability)
- *Thiqāt Dābitūn*: (unquestionably trustworthy)
- *Thiqāt*: (trustworthy)
- *Ṣadūq*: (truthful)
- *Ṣadūq yahim*: (truthful but open to mistakes)
- *Maqbūl*: (accepted for there is no proof against him)

On the other side the scholars mentioned six grades of *jarh* (unreliability);

- *Majhūl al-hal*: whose case is unknown, but there is nothing negative about him.

⁵¹ Dhahabī, *Siyar Alam al-Nubala'*, vol.4, p. 263.

⁵² Suyūfī, *Tadrib al-Rawi*, p. 22

⁵³ Azami, *Studies in Hadith*, p. 46.

⁵⁴ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 81.

⁵⁵ Gulen, *The Messenger of God*, 346.

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- Da'īf: weak for some have openly spoken against him.
- Majhūl: unknown, obscure, and no more than one person has narrated from him.
- Matrūk: abandoned because someone reliable scholars discredited him.
- Muttaham bi'l-kadhib: accused of lying and forgery.
- Khadhhab (liar), or wadda' (forger).

With rigorous method the scholars scrutinized all the hadiths and then classified them as authentic, fair and weak or sometimes as forged. After such tremendous studies, detailed examinations, and exacting verifications it is difficult to say that authentic hadith books contain forged hadiths. Those who continue to question Hadith and Sunna act out of nothing more than religious, political, and ideological prejudice, as well as from biased Orientalist scholarship, to cast doubt on this vital source of Islam and its implementation in one's daily life.⁵⁶

Hadith Classification

The scholars classified hadiths from the viewpoint of reliability or otherwise into three categories; *Sahīh* (reliable-sound), *Hasan* (fair) and *Da'īf* (weak). Hadith is classified as *Sahīh* when it's all narrators belong to the first three categories in reliability; the Companions, Thiqāt Dābitūn: (unquestionably trustworthy) and Thiqāt (trustworthy). *Sahīh* hadith has a continuous transmission of narrators all the way back to the Prophet and the narrators are all upright persons and possess retentive memories. Additionally, the narration is not contradicting to reliable reports and it is free of both obvious and subtle defects.

The most authoritative of all *Sahīh* is that which are recorded by both al-Bukhari and Muslim, followed by those which are recorded by al-Bukhari, or by Muslim, alone, then hadith which fulfil all of their conditions even if they do not appear in either.⁵⁷ When Imam Bukhari arrived in Baghdad, ten leading persons in Islamic sciences tested his knowledge of hadith and memory by making changes in hadiths either the order of the narrators in a chain of transmission or the chains with each other. However, Imam Bukhari corrected all those changes one by one from his memory and recited each hadith in its authentic version and then the scholars admitted his deep knowledge in hadith.⁵⁸

Hasan hadith is considered between the *sahīh* and *da'īf* in terms of reliability. The narrators of this type of hadith are known for truthfulness yet they have not attained the highest degree of reliability.⁵⁹ If there is any weakness with reference to retention and accuracy of the narrators the scholars classified this hadith as *Hasan*. It is believed that Tirmidhi introduced *hasan*, the intermediate category between *sahīh* and *da'īf*, the first time. *Hasan* hadith can be upgraded to the level of *sahīh* if it is supported by *sahīh* hadith with a stronger chain of transmission.

⁵⁶ Gulen, *The Messenger of God*, 351.

⁵⁷ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 140.

⁵⁸ Ibn Hajar, *Hady al-Sari*, p. 487.

⁵⁹ Al-Siba'ī, *Al-Sunnah*, p. 94.

Da'if hadith does not have the conditions of *sahīh* or *hasan* and it is defined as a hadith which its narrators include persons of lower grades from the six categories of unreliability. A hadith may be labelled as weak due to weakness in its transmission chain or in its textual body. There are many defects which qualify a hadith weak.

Mursal hadith is a weak for it has broken link in its transmission chain at the level of a Companion. If a Follower (*tabi'i*) reports a hadith directly from the Prophet by skipping to mention a Companion name it is considered *mursal* hadith for it is impossible for the Followers to see the Prophet and relate from him directly.

According to the general rule, the reliability of a hadith is determined on the weakest element in its transmission chain or in its textual body. For example, the presence of a single weak narrator in otherwise sound transmission chain would weaken the hadith and take it out of the *sahīh* category altogether and therefore it is rejected.⁶⁰

Marfu' hadith is a statement or conduct that is attributed to the Prophet due to a strong assumption that no one else could have validated it in the first place. Even though a Companion relates this statement or conduct and there is no direct saying of the Prophet on this matter the nature of statement or conduct reveals that it is strongly assumed that such thing is said or done by the Prophet.

On the other side, *mawquf* hadith which is different than *marfu'*, refers to a hadith that stops at the level of the Companion and the subject does not indicate if such statement or conduct said or done by the Prophet.

Marfu' hadith can be a word, act or tacit approval of the Prophet⁶¹ and it has continuous transmission chain of narrators.⁶² The subject matter of hadith often gives a better indication of it being a *marfu'* hadith such as when a Companion says something concerning the text of the Qur'an or the occasion of its revelation and the matter is such that he could not have said it entirely of his own opinion, it is classified as *marfu'*.⁶³ When the saying of a Companion contains a reference such as "we were commanded to do such and such, or were forbidden from such and such, or we used to do such and such," this is usually classified as *marfu'*.

Hadiths are once more classified into different categories from the view point of the number of narrators in their transmission chain. *Mutawātir* is a hadith which is narrated by a large number of people in every generation, so much so that it is inconceivable that they could have all collaborated in order to perpetuate a lie. Logic eliminates the possibility of lie in hadith due to the large number, diversity of residence, locality and time of the narrators in its transmission. The number of narrators in a *mutawātir* hadith must remain abundant from the start to the end of the transmission chain.

⁶⁰ Subhi al-Salih, *Ulūm al-Hadith*, p. 146

⁶¹ Suyūfī, *Tadrīb al-Rāwī*, Vol. I, p. 184.

⁶² Ibn al-Salah, *Ulūm al-Hadith*, p. 45.

⁶³ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, 156.

Mutawātir hadith has two types; *mutawātir lafzī*, which consists of the verbatim transmission of the sayings of the Prophet, *mutawātir ma'nawī* which consist of several reports through different channels which tend to support a common theme and meaning between them.⁶⁴ The following report is an example for *mutawātir lafzī*; “one who lies about me deliberately must prepare himself for a seat in Hell fire.”⁶⁵ An example of the *mutawātir ma'nawī* is the sum total of the various hadith reports that have been known on the raising of hands at the time of supplication.⁶⁶

The *Aḥād* (solitary) or *khābar al-wāḥid* (single source report) is a hadith that does not meet the conditions of *mutawātir*. This hadith may be reported by one, two or three persons at every level but it is not qualified as *mutawātir*. *Gharīb*, *aziz* and *mashhūr* are the subcategories of *āḥād* hadith. However, Ḥanafī scholars deem *mashhūr* hadith an intermediate category between *mutawātir* and *āḥād*.

Conflict in Hadith

Sometimes there might be apparent conflict between the two hadiths and the scholars utilize different methods to solve the problem. First method is reconciliation of the two hadiths. The scholars interpret both hadiths in a way that the conflict is removed. However, if they cannot be reconciled the following methods are used;

- The chronological order is identified for both hadith and the rules of abrogation (*naskh*) are applied for the later origin abrogates the former.
- If the chronological order is not known the rules of preference are used between the two hadiths. The stronger hadith is preferred over the weak one. The reliability of hadith narrators, the clarity and strength in hadith words help the scholar to determine which one is preferable.
- If the preference between the two hadiths is not possible both of them are abandoned for the conflict prevails and no action can be taken in any direction.

Unfamiliar Expressions in Hadith

The scholars produced works concerning unfamiliar expressions that are encountered in hadith. The difficulty in hadith may be caused due to the unfamiliar words or the customary usage in dialects. Ambiguity and confusion has also been caused by contact and literary influence from non-Arab sources on Arab language and culture. Another reason which makes difficult to understand the content of a hadith that Arab tribes had different dialects and some of their expressions may be unfamiliar to others.

⁶⁴ Kamali, *ibid*, p 170.

⁶⁵ Bukhari, *Saḥīḥ*, 'Ilm, 38.

⁶⁶ Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-Rāwī*, Vol. I, p. 191.

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The first work that addressed the unfamiliar expressions in hadiths was that of Abu ‘Ubayd Ma’mar b. al-Muthanna al-Taymi (d. 209 H), a small book in which he explained unfamiliar expressions in hadith by reference to Islamic or pre-Islamic origins of the words. The book clarifies how unfamiliar words were used in poetry and prose as well as the meaning they conveyed in the particular hadith.⁶⁷ Another well-known book in this field is *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Hadith wa’l-Athar* which is written by Ibn Athīr (d. 606 H).

The unfamiliar expressions in hadith are usually explained with two methods. In the first method the scholars look other hadiths on different subjects which may help them to understand the content of the unfamiliar expressions. In the second method, the scholars resort to the dictionaries and the works in the field of unfamiliar expressions to remove the ambiguity in hadiths.

⁶⁷ Kamali, *Hadith Studies*, p. 125.