

Understanding Islam **Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message**

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Part Four: Sifting and collecting the Hadith

Imagine the situation of those who lived alongside Muhammad in Makka and Madina. They understood him to be the Prophet sent by God to guide humankind on the straight path. He was in the process of receiving the revelation from God in the Qur'an. This revelation is a book of ethical guidance rather than a set of laws. It needed to be interpreted and to be put into practice in daily living. Who other than the Prophet could do this? He was the perfect example of living out the teaching of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an says of Muhammad that he is a "beautiful pattern of conduct" for people to follow [Q. 33:21]. Again the Qur'an instructs people "to obey God and his Prophet" [Q. 8:1] and notes that obedience to the Prophet is obedience to God [Q. 4:80]. Is it any wonder that they paid careful attention to whatever Muhammad said, taught, did or the things of which he approved? His way of living, in the same time, place and context in which they lived, was the best of all ways to live according to God's guidance. Their task was to imitate him in his godly way of life. They had the assurance of the Qur'an that the Prophet "does not speak out of [his own] desire" but that he was inspired by God in such a way that his speech and actions were preserved from error [Q. 53:3-4].

We can say that three types of speech came from the mouth of Muhammad. First, there were those times when he knew that he was not in control but that he was giving voice to the divine revelation that had been sent through him; this was the Qur'an. Second, there were those occasions when he spoke under divine guidance to teach and interpret the Qur'anic message in his own right as Prophet; these are the Traditions of Muhammad or the Hadith. Third, there were a small number of occasions when he received a message direct from God that was not part of the Qur'an but nevertheless it was God who spoke; these are the Holy Hadith or *Hadith Qudsi*.

Muslims believe that during his night journey to Jerusalem (*isra*) and ascent into the presence of God (*mi'raj*) he received knowledge of things that only God knew. He thus had knowledge of the unseen (*al-ghayb*); he knew more than ordinary people because he had been given this knowledge by God. At the same time, Muhammad made it clear that he did not know everything. Some things are known only to God [Q. 7:187; 31:34]. Some people have gained earthly knowledge and experience in their own trade or way of life that Muhammad did not possess. There is a famous example when he was asked by date farmers if this was the best moment for them to manually pollinate the date palms; after an unsuccessful initial experiment, he replied that they had been doing this work for years and so they were better judges of such things than he was.

The Sunni approach to passing on the teaching

We can imagine that the companions of Muhammad would come home at the end of the day and recount some new incident that they had observed or some piece of wisdom that they had heard. They would tell their families and so there would be children present who would be eager to hear and memorise such reports. We can imagine travellers and desert people who would return from a visit to Madina and be quizzed about new sayings. These would pass around the gatherings by the camp fires and strangers would be valued for their accounts of life with the Prophet. Remember that this was a society that worked on memory and the story-tellers were a much valued profession for the clarity of their memories. Not surprisingly, within a few decades of the death of Muhammad there were hundreds of thousands of such reports in circulation.

People were bound to ask, "From whom did you hear that?" Some could say, "I was in the presence of the Prophet and heard him say..." On other occasions, the answer would be, "I heard it from X, who was there when the Prophet said or did..." Who was the X here quoted? If it was a well-known companion of Muhammad like Abu Bakr or his daughter Fatima or one of his wives, then the statement automatically had a high authority as an accurate report. If it was someone less well-known, then obviously people would ask, "Who's he?" or "Who's she?" In this way, Hadith started to circulate with the names of those who had passed them on attached. These people were called the "transmitters." Sometimes the report might come from a private part of the Prophet's life transmitted by one of his wives. Sometimes the saying or action would be public and so there could have been dozens of people present who heard it and transmitted it to their own circle. We can see that some Hadith have multiple chains of transmitters going back to one or several people who were present to hear the Prophet say something. On some occasions, there might be an odd word that differed in the report of what was said and so we have duplicate Hadith and near-duplicates.

These chains of transmitters, technically called the *isnad* of a Hadith, generally started with someone who was in the presence of Muhammad when he said or did something. Such people were called the Companions or *Sahaba*. In time, the generally accepted definition of a Companion was someone who saw Muhammad whilst a Muslim and died as a Muslim. This could include quite young people; it is generally reckoned that the last of the major Companions to die was Anas ibn Malik, who became a servant of the Prophet's when he was ten years old and died in 711; that was 79 years after the death of Muhammad. In the great canonical collections of Hadith by al-Bukhari and Muslim (more on these later) there are 278 Hadith of which he was the transmitter. The wives of Muhammad were in the best position to transmit episodes from his personal life; of these his young wife Ayesha (d.678) was the most prolific. She appears in the *isnad* of more than 2,000 Hadith. She was the youngest of his wives and people would seek her out for information about the Prophet's life. Some people specialised in remembering and transmitting Hadith, like Abu Hurayra (d.678), who was one of a group that Muhammad trained in spiritual practices and so he was

frequently in the Prophet's company. He is reckoned to have transmitted some 3,500 Hadith.

Written and oral transmission

The sayings of Muhammad were passed throughout the community by word of mouth and eventually recorded in all sorts of early writings: history, biography (*sira*), Qur'an commentary (*tafsir*), theology, spiritual training (*tasawwuf*), etiquette (*adab*) and works on politics and the Arabic language. The number of such sayings in circulation in the early centuries would be many hundreds of thousands. It is claimed that Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855) had memorised "a million." It is better to think of these as "sayings" rather than to use the technical term of Hadith as only rarely was the full *isnad* recorded in such works and the sayings had not yet been subject to scholarly criticism. There were disputes within the early Muslim community and sayings were written and attributed to Muhammad to defend the position of different groups. Some individuals, inspired by pious motives, did not want people to be led astray from the correct path and so they linked their own sayings with the Prophet's name. It was not unusual in earlier centuries for people to put words into the mouth of an important person as though he or she had said them. As the Muslim community spread to new geographical regions and thus encountered new challenges, there were occasions on which the community leaders applied the general spirit of Islam to meet them and drew up sayings on the basis of, "What would the Prophet have said if he had been in this situation?"

From the time of the Companions onwards, people drew up their own personal written collections of Hadith (*sahifa*). There was a reluctance to do this within the community as they did not want the Hadith to be confused with the text of the Qur'an. These books of Hadith were handed down from father to son and from teacher to student. They should be thought of as aids to memory because the priority was given to oral transmission, which meant that the pronunciation, phrasing and meaning of the Hadith could also be transmitted. Students would study these books with their teachers, sometimes taking them down by dictation, and then being tested by the teacher listening to the student reading them back and, if necessary, correcting their own manuscript edition. Teachers would give their students permission to teach such books of Hadith when they were sure that they were correctly written, memorised and understood.

A style of collection grew up in which books were written organised by topics (*musannaf*). The best known of these is the *Muwatta* of Malik ibn Anas (d.795). This contained several hundred Hadith but also the sayings of Companions, those of the generation that followed them (the Successors or *Tabi'un*) and also some from Malik himself. This is best thought of as an early work of Islamic law, more focussed on giving guidance on questions of the practice of the early Muslim community in Madina rather than being a systematic collection of Hadith.

By the late 8th/early 9th century, a new style of collection emerged that reflected the growing emphasis on the *isnad* that demonstrated the authenticity of a Hadith. These collections (*musnad*) were arranged according to the Companion who began the chain of transmission from the Prophet. All the Hadith narrated by a certain Companion were grouped together without reference to their subject matter. The critical point was that each *isnad* had to be traced back to the Prophet himself. This emphasis is drawn from the work of al-Shafi'i (d.820), who founded one of the Schools of Law stressing the authentic Hadith of Muhammad. The best known of these early collections organised according to the *isnad* principle was the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855), which contained some 30,000 Hadith. He was one of the first great travellers in pursuit of Hadith and visited many cities in the Islamic Empire of his time. Even though his *Musnad* is a large collection, it contained only a tiny proportion of the sayings that he knew thus emphasising the importance of a critical analysis based on the authentication of a reliable *isnad*.

The Canonical Collections

The ninth century proved to be a watershed for the collection and classification of Hadith. The two key people here are al-Bukhari (d.870) and Abu'l-Husayn Muslim (d.875; he is normally known simply as "Muslim"). They travelled around the Muslim communities collecting and sifting Hadith. They included only those Hadith that they considered to have a complete and unbroken chain of transmitters linking the saying to the Prophet himself. Such Hadith are called *sahih*, meaning sound in every respect. Their two collections are regarded as the most authoritative of the Sunni collections and are often referred to as the *Sahihayn* or the "two *sahih* collections." Al-Bukhari is reported to have sifted 600,000 sayings to find his final compilation of 7,397 *sahih* Hadith. This was a religious duty for him; we are told that he performed two cycles of formal prayer to seek God's guidance before including a Hadith in his collection. Muslim has a total of 12,000 *sahih* Hadith but both collections contain many repetitions, that is Hadith that are (almost) identical but with different *isnads*. Such multiple chains of transmitters are seen as signs of additional authenticity. Both works are arranged according to topics and divided into many chapters and sub-sections to assist in classification. They form the first two of the six "canonical" or formally accepted collections of Hadith by the Sunni community. A total of 2326 Hadith are found in both collections, which gives them additional authority.

The other four collections that make up the Sunni canon of six books of authentic Hadith were compiled by Abu Dawud (d.889), al-Nasa'i (d.916), al-Tirmidhi (d.892), and Ibn Majah (d.887). A canon comprising the first four of these works was widely accepted by the eleventh century and the full canon, included the last two, was generally agreed by the thirteenth century. All six books together contain almost 20,000 authenticated Hadith and are now available in English translation. This does not mean that they are regarded as a complete collection of the only authentic Hadith or even that they contain all the *sahih* Hadith. Massive compilations of Hadith carried on for several centuries after the canon was regarded as complete.

Further Hadith collections

Together with the ethical guidance of the Qur'an, the Hadith form the basis for Islamic law and this gave rise to collections of legal Hadith called *Akham al-Hadith*. Great commentaries (*sharh*) were written on the Hadith collections to explain and elaborate on their meanings. These reached their peak in the fifteenth century with the commentary of Ibn Hajar (d.1449) on Bukhari. Some scholars compiled anthologies of Hadith from the canonical collections to help people in their daily lives. The best known of these, which became the standard textbook in the Indian Subcontinent, is the *Mishkat al-Masabih* compiled by al-Tabrizi (d.1337). Attempts were made at comprehensive compilations by scholars like al-Suyuti (d.1505) but later scholars found many Hadith that had been omitted.

A tradition grew up within Muslim circles of memorising forty Hadith based on a saying attributed to the Prophet that someone who does so will benefit from his intercession on the Day of Judgement. This led to scholars compiling collections of this number of Hadith on various topics. The best known and most widely used of these collections is the Forty Hadith on the Principles of Religion (*Al-Arba'in*) compiled by al-Nawawi (d.1277).

A separate group of sayings are the Holy Hadith or *Hadith Qudsi*. Previously, we have used the term Hadith to refer to the authenticated records of what Muhammad said, taught, or did and the things of which he approved. Technically these are the *Hadith Nabawi* or the Hadith of the Prophet. These are distinguished from the *Hadith Qudsi*, in which the Prophet is conveying a message from God, although the precise wording is not necessarily of divine authorship (unlike the Qur'an). These *Hadith Qudsi* are generally introduced with a phrase like, "God said in what God's Messenger related from him..." There have been a few collections of these *Hadith Qudsi* compiled through the centuries and the number varies considerably. The most well-known is the *Mishkat al-Anwar* compiled by Ibn Arabi (d.1240), which contains 101 *Hadith Qudsi*.

Sifting the sayings for authentic Hadith

Imagine al-Bukhari beginning with 600,000 sayings and finding less than 8,000 worthy of being recorded in his *sahih* collection; how was that done? From the eighth century onwards, when there were no more people alive who had seen the Prophet and many of the third generation of Muslims had died, attention was focused on the transmitters. The logic is obvious: Where did each saying originate and how did it reach us? Did all the alleged transmitters exist? Were they reliable? Do we know that two alleged transmitters were in the same place at the same time to hand on the Hadith? Is it possible to corroborate the reports of one chain of transmitters with the testimony of another?

In order to be considered *sahih*, Hadith had to be traced back to someone who could testify to being in the presence of Muhammad when he said or did something. If the original transmitter could only say, "Someone told me that the Prophet said..." then that Hadith could not be accepted as *sahih*. There was a discussion about who could be accepted as a Companion; the first generation of Muslims. Could someone qualify as a Companion if they were still a child when Muhammad died? Did both men and women qualify as Companions to transmit Hadith? Did the person have to be a believer at the time and what if they gave up their Muslim faith later? What about the character of a Companion: obviously if someone was a known liar, then they could not be regarded as a transmitter, but did they need to live perfect lives and if there was evidence of an occasional lapse of memory, did this render them unreliable?

The scholars discussed these issues and generally agreed that someone who saw Muhammad whilst a believer and died a Muslim could be considered as a Companion, even if they were quite young during the Prophet's life. Women were not only accepted as transmitters but were prized as such because they generally lived longer than men and so there would be fewer links in the chain of transmitters. Companions were expected to have lived upright and pious lives but were not expected to be sinless; the critical question was whether they could ever have been shown to be untruthful in what they transmitted. Emphasis was placed on a Hadith that warned: "Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare a seat for himself in hellfire." There is debate about the number of people who can be regarded as Companions but the number is certainly counted in tens of thousands, however in the six Sunni canonical collections less than one thousand are mentioned as transmitters.

The criteria for accepting the identity and character of a Companion as transmitter were extended to all the transmitters who were said to have handed on a particular Hadith. Their identity was checked; this was not an easy task when people were named after their fathers or as parents of a certain son or as members of a certain tribe or belonging to a particular place. Where they lived was researched and important dates in their lives ascertained, especially when they died. In this way it was possible to check if a certain transmitter could have heard the Hadith in question from the previous transmitter: Were they in the right place at the right time to have met? If a transmitter was a teacher, then did more than one of his or her students transmit the same Hadith; in this way they could be cross-checked. Did the report of an early student agree with what students of a later period reported about the Hadith transmitted by a teacher; was there consistency? Once some transmitters were checked out and could be shown to be reliable, then they could be used to cross-check the reliability of another potential transmitter. This process did not end in the early period but right down through the centuries scholars of Hadith have continued the process of sifting and cross-checking.

Eventually transmitters who were worthy of inclusion in a chain of transmitters (*isnad*) attached to Hadith were classified according to their reliability. Three key categories can be noted: *thiqa*: those transmitters who were regarded as reliable so that the Hadith transmitted by them could be used in legal rulings; *saduq*: those

transmitters who were regarded as sincere but Hadith transmitted by them were in need of corroboration before they could be accepted; and *da'if*: those transmitters who were regarded as weak and could only be used to corroborate others. Not all scholars applied these categories in exactly the same way; some set higher standards than others. In time, dictionaries of transmitters were drawn up, the earliest is generally accepted to have been by Ibn Sa'd (d.845) with his Great Book of the Generations (*Tabaqat al-Kubra*) but this process also goes on down through the centuries. Great emphasis was laid on the earliest generations of Muslims following a Hadith that said: "The best generation is that into which I was sent, then that which follows, then that which follows them."

We have seen the weight given to the principle of contiguous transmission; showing that each transmitter could have been in the presence of the person before them in the chain to ensure that they could have heard it from them. Similarly, we have noted the importance of teachers who passed on Hadith orally, giving their students an explanation of the meaning of the Hadith in question. They required their students to memorise Hadith under their supervision and recite them back to the teacher with their commentary. Many teachers dictated their own collection of Hadith to their students and then gave them permission, after their manuscripts had been checked, to teach those collections to others.

Corroboration was sought to see if a different chain of transmitters passed on the same Hadith from the same Companion. Some Hadith had the same content but were passed through different chains of transmitters originating from different Companions. Sometimes the Hadith had slight variations with the inclusion or omission of a word, for example, in the Hadith already cited: "Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare a seat for himself in hellfire" some versions omitted the word "intentionally." The scholars saw three principal levels of corroboration: those Hadith that had many chains of transmission at every stage (*mutawatir*), which were highly prized as giving certain knowledge; those Hadith with different chains of transmission that had received such a high level of agreement amongst the scholars that their acceptance was approaching a consensus (*mashhur*); and finally those Hadith that had only one or a few chains of transmission (*ahad*) so that they could be regarded as giving only a strong probability of authentic knowledge.

This process led to a scholarly classification of Hadith. We can note three principal classifications here: those Hadith that were regarded as sound in every respect (*sahih*) with an unbroken chain of reliable transmitters going right back to Muhammad himself and which did not contain anything contrary to the Qur'an or the established *sunna* of the Prophet; those Hadith that were regarded as good (*hasan*) with a sound chain of transmitters and corroboration but with some slight weakness, such as one transmitter who did not always show perfect memory, that prevented them from meeting the rigorous standards required to be accepted as *sahih*; and those Hadith that lacked some element for inclusion in these two classifications (*da'if*). Only *sahih* and *hasan* Hadith could be used in legal rulings, while *da'if* Hadith could only be used for character training and in pious practice.

So far only the chain of transmitters had been subject to critical analysis but soon the scholars turned to the content (*matn*) of the Hadith itself. Two schools can be noted here. Those who gave greater emphasis to authentic transmission (*Ahl al-Hadith*) on the basis that the Prophet had higher knowledge than ordinary people as he had received inspiration direct from God and so later generations were not in a position to criticise the content of an authentically transmitted Hadith. Then there were those scholars who gave a higher place to reason in judging the content of a Hadith (*Ahl al-Ra'y*); they would subject the content to the scrutiny of reason: does it claim something that did not come to pass, like the end of the world, or something out of time (anachronistic) or something that just was not rational. This led to a degree of tension and difference of opinion between different schools about whether a Hadith was reliable or not.

The Shi'a approach to Hadith

Three things mark out the Shi'a approach to the Hadith from the outset. First, Imam Ali, the divinely appointed successor to Muhammad, was the first male Muslim and the constant companion of the Prophet during his lifetime. He was thus in a privileged position to observe and learn from Muhammad the Muslim way of life. From the beginning, as a youth, he was told by Muhammad that he was to be his close friend and successor. It was thus natural that he would mark the way in which Muhammad conducted his life as the “beautiful pattern” of Muslim living. He was married to Muhammad’s daughter and his two sons, later to be the second and third Imams, were like sons to Muhammad and so experienced life with him, even though they were boys when the Prophet died. Ali and Fatima were in an ideal position to pass on authentic Hadith to their two sons and so begin a privileged chain of transmission.

Second, in Shi'a understanding, the Ahl al-Bayt or Family of the Prophet, were the bearers of the Inner Light of divine inspiration. They were thus rendered sinless and preserved from error. This inner knowledge gave them a certainty about interpreting the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad as the divinely appointed guides to the community. Not only did they have the privileged chain of transmission from father to son over three hundred years but they were preserved from error in declaring some piece of teaching to be authentic. This means that it was sufficient authentication for a Hadith that one of the Imams should declare it so to be.

Third, the period after the death of Muhammad was one marked by strife and indeed civil war within the Muslim community concerning the rightful succession and how to put the teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet into practice. In Shi'a understanding, a large number of the Companions were present when Muhammad publicly nominated Ali as his successor and they pledged obedience to him. Later, after the death of Muhammad, they did not put his instruction into practice and went back on their oath of allegiance by choosing others to lead the community. This means that many of the Companions, who are central to Hadith transmission for Sunnis, are regarded as being unreliable witnesses and reporters of the Prophet’s Hadith. Indeed, some of those who

figure prominently as originators in the Sunni chains of transmission were key leaders in the opposition to Ali taking up his rightful role as the divinely appointed head of the community. This enables us to see that one of the central criteria for acceptance of a Companion or someone from a later generation as a reporter of the two most sound classes of Hadith was that they should profess correct belief in the right of the Imams to be heads of the community, or in other words, they should be Shi'a.

The confusion of this early period is compounded by the fact that it is believed that there were several important Hadith collections from the Companions that have been lost although some survived until the period of the Imams. During the time of the Imams, there was less of an emphasis on systematic collections of Hadith as the community always had the Imam on hand to ask. During this period some four hundred books are spoken of under the general title of “the sources” (*usul*). These Hadith were typically recorded direct from one of the Imams and more emphasis was placed upon them after the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam. Only sixteen of these books are still known to exist but the others are held to have been sources for the great Shi'a collections of Hadith that were compiled in the tenth century.

Means of authentication of Shi'a Hadith

The Shi'a Imams are held to be preserved from error by virtue of the Inner Light given to them by God, therefore if one of the Imams authenticated a Hadith that was sufficient evidence for it to be accepted. There are three routes of authentication within the Shi'a system: first, from the Prophet through the transmission of the Imams; second, beginning with one of the Imams and transmitted through later Imams; and third, from an Imam transmitted through a chain of transmitters drawn from his followers. Some Hadith originated with a report by one of the Companions who supported the right of succession of the Ahl al-Bayt that was later approved by one of the Imams and thus authenticated.

Four canonical collections

A massive compendium of Hadith was collected and arranged systematically by Al-Kulayni (d.939) called “The Sufficient Book of Knowledge of Religion” (*Al-Kafi*). This was followed by the work of Ibn Babawayh (d.991) commonly referred to as *Faqih*. Ibn Babawayh had a student known by his title Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1022) who gave greater weight to the use of reason in the science of Hadith. He in turn had a student called Al-Tusi (d.1067) who contributed the final two canonical collections: *Tahdhib al-Ahkam*, a commentary on Shaykh al-Mufid’s Hadith work, and *Istibsar*, his own study and classification of Hadith. These four works are considered to be canonical due to their wide acceptance amongst the scholars rather than any claim to them being in themselves infallible.

The Shi'a Hadith have been classified into the same broad divisions of *sahih*, *hasan* and *da'if*. In Hadith regarded as *sahih* and *hasan* in the Shi'a collections, all transmitters had to be Shi'a, but a third class of Hadith, called *muwaththaq*, were

accepted when a chain of transmitters included a reliable and trustworthy Sunni. There is no question of criticising the transmission through the infallible Imams but other transmitters have been subjected to scrutiny and directories of sound transmitters have been written. The weight given to reason in the criticism of the content of Hadith varies from one school to another.

Hadith common to both Sunni and Shi'a collections

Many Hadith occur in both collections and are thus shared between both traditions. Some of the Shi'a Hadith are traced back only as far as one of the infallible Imams, which is sufficient from a Shi'a perspective but inadequate for the Sunnis. Those Hadith that support the particularity of Shi'a doctrine tend only to be found in their collections or, if they occur also in the Sunni collections, they are interpreted differently. Sometimes a Hadith in the Sunni collections is found in a longer form in the Shi'a sources with the extension referring to support for a Shi'a doctrine; this can be seen as an addition in one collection or an omission in the other, depending on perspective. Amongst the Companions, some of those held to support the Shi'a understanding of the succession occur in Sunni chains of transmitters provided that they meet the criteria of reliability and trustworthiness.