

# Hadith



# Hadith

*Muhammad's Legacy in the  
Medieval and Modern World*

JONATHAN A. C. BROWN



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*'Whoever has preserved one life, it is as if he has  
saved all of humanity.'*

*Quran 5:32*

*To Julia Taft*

*My godmother and the noblest woman I have known ...*



## CONTENTS

<i>Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>Conventions, Abbreviations, and Transliteration</i>	xii
1. The Prophet's Words Then and Now: Hadith and Its Terminology	1
2. The Transmission and Collection of Prophetic Traditions	15
3. The Methods and History of Hadith Criticism	67
4. Prophetic Traditions in Shiite Islam	123
5. The Function of Prophetic Traditions in Islamic Law and Legal Theory	150
6. The Function of Prophetic Traditions in Theology	173
7. The Function of Prophetic Traditions in Sufism	184
8. The Authenticity Question: Western Debates over the Historical Reliability of Prophetic Traditions	197
9. Debates over Prophetic Traditions in the Modern Muslim World	240
10. Conclusion	269
<i>Glossary</i>	276
<i>Bibliography</i>	282
<i>Index</i>	295

## ILLUSTRATIONS

2.0	Leading Hadith Transmitters from the Companions	19
2.1	Transmission and Criticism of Hadiths from the Companions of the Prophet and Successors	24
2.2	Subchapter from ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s <i>Musannaf</i> Concerning Ablutions	26
2.3	<i>Musnad</i> Organization	29
3.0	Types of Errors and Forgery in Hadiths	76
3.1	Generations of Sunni Hadith Critics	78
3.2	Corroboration	93
3.3	Rating of Hadiths and Their Uses among the Early and Later Hadith Critics	103
3.4	Hadiths Prohibiting Putting on one’s Shoes while Standing: the Transmission of Abū Hurayra	114
3.5	Hadiths Prohibiting Putting on one’s Shoes while Standing: the Transmission of Anas b. Mālik	115
3.6	Hadiths Prohibiting Putting on one’s Shoes while Standing: the Transmission of Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh	116
3.7	Hadiths Prohibiting Putting on one’s Shoes while Standing: the Transmission of Ibn ‘Umar	117
4.0	The Twelve Imams	124
4.1	Forms of Imami Shiite Hadiths	125
8.0	Schacht’s Common Link	211
8.1	Juynboll’s Common Link Theory	214
8.2	Cook’s Theory of <i>Tadlīs</i> and Spread of <i>Isnāds</i>	222
8.3	<i>Isnād/Matn</i> Analysis	230

## PREFACE

The science of hadith is a noble one, and generations of scholars far, far more capable and devoted than I have dedicated their lives to transmitting, analyzing, and sorting through the legacy attributed to Muhammad. One could spend a lifetime reading the works of scholars like al-Bukhārī, al-Dhahabī, and Ibn Hajar, and two lifetimes trying to keep up with them. Matching their accomplishments is inconceivable to me. I can only hope that this book provides an adequate introduction to their work and the influence it has had on Islamic civilization.

Students and colleagues always ask me whether the Sunni hadith tradition provides an accurate representation of Muhammad's teachings. In truth, I can only say that projects such as this book are part of my search for the answer to that question. As the Chinese art collector Lu Shih-hua (d. 1779 CE) once wrote, such matters 'came to us from the ancients. The ancients are gone, and we cannot raise them from the Nether World to question them. So how can we arrive at the truth without being vain and false in our wrangling noisily about it?'<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan A. C. Brown  
*Khādim al-hadīth al-sharīf*  
Sana, Yemen, 2007

## ENDNOTE

1 Wen Fong, 'The Problem of Forgery in Chinese Painting: Part One,' p. 99.

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I must also thank my wonderful family, especially my mother, Dr. Ellen Brown, who remains a scholarly inspiration to me. My sisters Kate, Lucinda, and Senem, my aunt Kate and my friends Asad Naqvi and Brenden Kerr require special thanks for keeping me sane and making sure I dress decently.

## CONVENTIONS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND TRANSLITERATION

Dates in this book will follow the Hijrī/Common Era format, where the first date (the Hijrī date) is that of the Islamic lunar calendar, which begins with Muhammad's emigration to Medina in 1/622. Obviously, pre-Islamic dates will follow the standard Before Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE) dating system. After the 1700s CE we no longer include Hijrī dates as they serve little use after that point.

Abbreviations used in this book include '**b.**' for the Arabic '*ibn,*' or 'son of ...', and (**s**) for the honorific Arabic phrase 'May the peace and blessings of God be upon him (*sallā Allāh 'alayhi wa sallam*),' which is commonly said and written after Muhammad's name.

The transliteration characters in this book represent the long vowels in Arabic and Persian: **ā**, **ī**, and **ū**. The ' character represents a simple glottal stop, like the initial sounds of both syllables in 'uh oh.' The ' symbol indicates the Arabic letter '*ayn*, a sound that resembles the 'Aaah' noise a person makes when getting their throat checked by the doctor. In Arabic and Persian words, '**q**' represents a voiceless velar sound produced at the back of the throat and is non-existent in English. One could most closely approximate this sound with the 'c' sound at the beginning of the crow noise 'caw! caw!' '**Gh**' indicates a sound similar to the French 'r', and '**kh**' represents a velar fricative like the sound of clearing one's throat. '**Dh**' indicates the 'th' sound in words like 'that' or 'bother.' '**Th**' represents the 'th' sound in words like 'bath.'

# 1

## THE PROPHET'S WORDS THEN AND NOW: HADITH AND ITS TERMINOLOGY

‘We have a question,’ the man said, his rural accent betraying the long trip he must have made from his provincial hamlet to the metropolis of Cairo. ‘We have built a school for boys and girls,’ the man continued, sitting cross-legged on the carpet with his eyes angled reverently upward at the scholar seated in the sturdy wooden chair before him. ‘But some members of our community say that we cannot allow the girls to attend because they will mix with the boys in the hallways. Are we allowed to open the school?’ The man waited anxiously, as did the students seated deferentially around the scholar, I among them. The fall of 2003 was unusually hot, and the hesitant breezes that penetrated the wooden lattice walls were welcomed by all.

The scholar, a middle-aged man who would soon be elevated to one of the most influential religious positions in the Sunni Muslim world, the chief jurisconsult (*muftī*) of Egypt, leaned down towards the tape recorder that the man had dragged with him on his long journey. ‘Do you have the Nile down where you are?’ the scholar asked. ‘Yes,’ the man replied. ‘Listen, then, whoever you are who objects to opening this school to girls,’ the scholar said into the recorder, ‘go throw yourself in the Nile! For did the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, not say **“Do not prevent the female servants of God from the mosques of God”**?’<sup>1</sup>

For over a thousand years Muslim peasants, merchants, and princes have flocked to the vaulted rooms that line the great courtyard of Cairo’s al-Azhar Mosque to seek the counsel of the ulema, those scholars who define Islamic faith and religious law. Seated in this courtyard on a fall day in 2003, the future ‘Grand Mufti of

## 2 *Hadith*

the Egyptian Lands' could look back on over fourteen hundred years of the Islamic religious tradition, that corpus of scholarship that elucidated the message brought by Muhammad and is one of the world's most elaborate and rich intellectual edifices. In responding to the question of this simple man, the mufti could draw from the capacious tradition of Islamic legal discourse: the bodies of law of the four major Sunni legal schools, the obscure opinions of medieval scholars long eclipsed by time, or the general principles that governed Islamic law and its derivation.

Although his mind was no doubt scanning this abundant legal heritage as he pondered the man's question, the scholar did not reply with any high legal language or dry legal ruling. Instead, he answered the man with the words of a figure whom Muslims are taught from childhood to love and venerate as a moral exemplar and object of devotion, a person 'dearer to them than their own child or parents.'<sup>i</sup> The scholar reached back through the centuries to the words of the Prophet Muhammad, words that he knew would resonate in this simple man's heart as clearly as the day they were first spoken and would lay all the concerns of his rural community to rest. Even amid the confusion of the modern world, today as before, 'the Prophet of God is most worthy of being followed.'<sup>2</sup>

Muhammad's precedent has been invoked in places and times far distant from the Nile Valley. His words speak with compelling power throughout the Muslim world, among Sunnis and Shiites alike. A year after I had heard the future 'Grand Mufti of the Egyptian Lands' issue his opinion, I sat in the lush courtyard of the Khan Madrasa in the ancient Persian city of Shiraz, discussing issues of Islamic thought with an Imami Shiite cleric. As the morning sun shone on the intricate floral tiles of the mosque's vaulted enclosure, we were debating whether or not 'Alī, the Prophet's son-in-law and well-spring of the Shiite tradition, possessed revealed knowledge of future events. 'The Commander of the Faithful, 'Alī, may God's blessings be upon him, knew that oil would be found in these lands and that "steel birds would fly", ' the Shiite cleric expounded energetically. 'This knowledge he got from the Messenger of God, his teacher, for did the Messenger not say, **"I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate. So whoever seeks knowledge let him approach it by its gate"?**'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>i</sup> See the hadith 'None of you truly believes until I am dearer to him than his child, his parent and the people altogether': Ahmad b. Shuayb al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī: kitāb al-īmān, bāb 'alāmat al-īmān*.

Among Western readership, the question ‘What does Islam say about’ some issue is usually followed by reference to the Quran. A Western journalist writing about the dress habits of Egyptian women informs us that wearing the headscarf is not an injunction from the Quran,<sup>4</sup> while pundits discussing jihad note that the Quran says ‘slay the unbelievers wherever you find them’ (Quran 9:5). Certainly, to Muslims the Quran is the literal word of God. It is a text revered to such an extent that many Muslims memorize it in its entirety as children, and many Muslims believe that a state of ritual purity is required to touch its pages.

Yet the Quran is not the source to which a curious reader should refer in order to answer the question ‘What does Islam say about’ a particular issue. The Quran is not a book of law, and many tenets of Islamic theology are never mentioned in the holy book. To consult the Quran is only to get part of the picture. Large portions of the Islamic legal, theological, and popular religious traditions come not from the book that Muslims hold to be God’s revelation, but rather from the legacy of Muhammad, whom they believe God chose to explain and elucidate His message through word and deed. It is in his teachings that we find Muslim dress codes as well as the rules and restrictions for holy war.

The normative legacy of the Prophet is known as the **Sunna**, and, although it stands second to the Quran in terms of reverence, it is the lens through which the holy book is interpreted and understood. In this sense, in Islamic civilization the Sunna has ruled over the Quran, shaping, specifying, and adding to the revealed book. Understanding how the message of Islam spread outward from Arabia in the seventh century and how it nurtured the various legal, theological, mystical, and cultural dimensions of Islamic civilization must begin with the study of the heritage left by Muhammad.

For much of Islamic history, the unit through which the Sunna was preserved, transmitted, and understood has been the *hadīth* (Arabic plural, *ahādīth*), or a report describing the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet. Unlike the Quran, the hadiths were not quickly and concisely compiled during and immediately after Muhammad’s life. Because hadiths were recorded and transmitted over a period of decades and even centuries, they are not in and of themselves contemporary historical documentation of what Muhammad said and did. In the century after the Prophet’s mission, the Muslim community passed through no less than three civil wars and numerous sectarian schisms. As a result, hadiths were forged by different parties trying to

#### 4 *Hadith*

manipulate the authority of the Sunna. The question of the authenticity of hadiths and how one can distinguish true ones from forgeries has been a perennial concern to both the Muslim scholars who turned to the Sunna to elaborate the Islamic tradition and Western scholars who have studied it.

The tool that Muslim scholars developed to help ensure the authenticity of hadiths was the *isnād* (Arabic, ‘support’), or the chain of transmitters through which a scholar traced the *matn*, or text, of a hadith back to the Prophet. The *isnād* 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 *isnād* is part of the religion – if not for the *isnād*, whoever wanted could say whatever they wanted.’

The Prophet’s words, however, have always been more than just a type of proof used in discussions of Islamic law and dogma. The *isnād* and the hadith it transmits have been more than fodder for debates over authenticity and means of establishing it. For the Muslim scholarly class, the ulema, tracing the *isnād* of a hadith back to Muhammad is to follow one’s genealogy of sacred knowledge back to its source. It is a medium of connection to the Prophet, ‘the beloved of God,’ and a link to the scholarly titans of the past. Even today, reciting one’s *isnād* is to walk back in memory through the pantheon corridor of great scholars whose labors had built up Islamic tradition. The students who sat gathered around the future Mufti of Egypt on that hot fall day in Cairo had each folded gingerly a piece of paper listing the scholar’s *isnād* back to the earliest hadith collection, the *Muwatta’* of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/796), and from that eighth-century author through his *isnāds* back to the Prophet. Each paper stated that the Mufti had given these students permission to transmit the hadiths in the collection via his *isnād*. By hearing this book of hadiths through the Mufti’s chain of transmission, these students had become part of the timeless tradition of passing knowledge from one generation to the next.

For over a thousand years, Muslim students, ‘the seekers of knowledge,’ have traveled from city to city in the Muslim world to hear hadiths recited by master scholars, receive their permission to transmit them, and be incorporated into the living *isnād* tradition. In the summer of 2007 I traveled from Egypt across the Red Sea to the sweltering, sandy coastal plain of Tihama in Yemen. There I made my way inland to the ancient trading city of Zabid, its whitewashed brick walls and dust-blown winding alleys seemingly immune to the

passage of time. Over the centuries, this city had more than any other place in the Muslim world preserved the tradition of narrating hadiths by full *isnāds* back to Muhammad. In an old madrasa I found the mufti of the city seated on one of the high wicker beds so common to the region, surrounded by his students. The mufti set down the book he was explaining, and the students stared inquisitively as he asked who I was and why I had come. ‘To hear a hadith through your *isnād*, the *isnād* of the people of Zabid, O virtuous teacher,’ I replied. After hearing my request, the mufti agreed to recite the hadith that a scholar must always give his students first. ‘Write this down,’ the mufti instructed, ‘and do not forget us in your most sincere prayers’:

I, Muhammad ‘Alī al-Battāh of the Ahdal clan, heard from my teacher Ahmad son of Dāwūd al-Battāh, who heard from his teacher the Mufti Sulaymān son of Muhammad al-Ahdal, from Muhammad son of ‘Abd al-Bāqī al-Ahdal, from Muhammad son of ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Ahdal, from the Mufti ‘Abd al-Rahmān son of Sulaymān al-Ahdal, from his father Sulaymān son of Yahyā al-Ahdal, from Abū Bakr al-Ahdal, from Ahmad al-Ahdal, from the Pillar of Islam, Yahyā son of Umar al-Ahdal, from Abū Bakr al-Battāh, from Yūsuf son of Muhammad al-Battāh, from Tāhir son of Husayn al-Ahdal, from the hadith master Ibn Dayba<sup>‘</sup>, from the sheik Zayn al-Dīn al-Sharijī of Zabid, from Nafīs al-Dīn Sulaymān al-‘Alawī, from ‘Alī son of Shaddād, from the imam Ahmad the Candlemaker, from his father Sharaf al-Dīn the Candlemaker, from Zāhir son of Rustum of Esfahan, from ‘Abd al-Malik of Karūkh, from Abū Nasr son of Muhammad of Herat, from Abū Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Jarrāh of Merv, from Abū al-‘Abbās Muhammad son of Ahmad of Merv, from the definitive hadith master Muhammad son of ‘Īsā of Tirmiz, from Ibn Abī ‘Umar, from Ibn ‘Uyayna, from ‘Amr son of Dīnār, from Abū Qābūs, from ‘Abdallāh son of ‘Amr, from the Messenger of God, who said, **The merciful, indeed Most Merciful God has mercy upon them. Have mercy in this earthly world, and He that is in the heavens will have mercy on you.**<sup>25</sup>

## THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

This book is an introduction to the hadith tradition, its collection, its criticism, its functions in Islamic civilization and the controversies surrounding it to this day. This present chapter will introduce you to

## 6 *Hadith*

some crucial terminology for the study of hadiths. In Chapter 2, we will discuss the collection and transmission of hadiths in Sunni Islam, as well as the various genres of hadith literature that developed from the early Islamic period until modern times. Chapter 3 will explain the science of hadith criticism developed by Sunni scholars and the various debates and developments that affected it throughout Islamic history. Chapter 4 looks at the hadith traditions of Imami and Zaydi Shiism as well as their interaction with that of Sunni Islam. Chapter 5 explores the functions of hadiths in Islamic law and legal theory, and Chapter 6 investigates the role of hadiths in elaborating Islamic theology. Chapter 7 tackles the important functions of hadiths in the Islamic mystical tradition, commonly known as Sufism. Chapter 8 turns away from Muslim discourse on hadiths to trace the Western academic study of hadiths and Western debates over their historical reliability. Finally, Chapter 9 explores debates among modern Muslims over the reliability of hadiths and their proper role in understanding Islam today.

### WHAT IS A HADITH? CRUCIAL TERMINOLOGY AND EXAMPLES OF HADITHS

The Prophet Muhammad's mission lasted twenty-three years, from 610 CE when he announced to his wife that he had received a revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel in a cave outside Mecca, to his death in 632 CE as the head of the powerful Islamic state in Medina. During his career as a prophet and leader, there was no courtroom stenographer assiduously recording his every word and furnishing an official transcript of his orders, religious edicts, or everyday speech. Instead, the generation of Muslims who lived with the Prophet, known as the **Companions** (Arabic: *Sahāba*), sought to preserve Muhammad's words and deeds either in their memories or through some means of writing, passing these recollections on to others. These reports were passed on from generation to generation, in oral and/or written form, until scholars compiled them in permanent collections.

Each hadith, or report about the Prophet, consists of a text (*matn*) describing his words or actions, and a chain of transmission (*isnād*) by which this report was communicated. Clearly, more than one

Companion could report the Prophet saying or doing something, or a Companion could recount this report to more than one person. This would result in more than one chain of transmission for the report. We must thus distinguish between an instance of the Prophet speaking or acting, which we will refer to either by its Arabic term ‘hadith’ or by the term ‘**tradition**,’ and the various chains of transmission of this tradition.

As in a game of ‘Telephone,’ a report could mutate as it was passed from person to person. As we know from our own daily lives, reports could also be repeated in expanded or contracted form depending on context. Each of these varying transmissions of the tradition we will call a **narration** of the hadith. For example, it is transmitted from the Companion ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr that the Prophet said, ‘**Whoever misrepresents me, let him prepare for himself a seat in Hellfire.**’<sup>6</sup> But the mainstream narrations of this tradition, from many Companions such as Anas b. Mālik, Ibn Mas‘ūd and Abū Hurayra, quote the Prophet as saying ‘**Whoever misrepresents me intentionally, let him prepare for himself a seat in Hellfire.**’ Here we see how two narrations of one Prophetic tradition differ in an important way.

The following are some examples of hadiths addressing a range of legal, ritual, theological, and ethical topics from the major sects of Islam. From the most revered Sunni hadith collection, the *Sahīh* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), we find a hadith that served as evidence in Islamic theological debates over whether believers will meet God on the Day of Judgment:

Al-Bukhārī writes: it was narrated to us by Yūsuf b. Mūsā: it was narrated to us by Abū Usāma: it was narrated to me by al-A‘mash, from Khaythama, from the Companion ‘Adī b. Hātim, who said that:

The Messenger of God, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, said, ‘**There is not one among you except that he will be spoken to directly by his Lord with no translator or any barrier separating them.**’<sup>7</sup>

From the *Sunan* of the Sunni scholar Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889), this hadith was used to help derive Islamic laws on taxation:

Abū Dāwūd writes: it was narrated to us by Muhammad b. Dāwūd b. Sufyān: it was narrated to us by Yahyā b. Hassān: it was narrated to us by Sulaymān b. Mūsā: it was narrated to us by Ja‘far b. Sa‘d: it was

## 8 *Hadith*

narrated to me by Khubayb b. Sulaymān, from his father, from the Companion Samura b. Jundub, who said [in a speech]:

**Indeed the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, would order us to pay the charity tax on things that we were preparing for sale.**<sup>8</sup>

From the *Muʿjam al-saghīr* of the Sunni scholar al-Tabarānī (d. 360/971) we find a hadith that indicates both Muhammad's character and the permissibility of lending items:

Al-Tabarānī writes: it was narrated to us by Ahmad b. Mansūr al-Jundisābūrī: it was narrated to us by 'Alī b. Harb: it was reported to us by Ash'ath b. 'Attāf, from 'Abdallāh b. Habīb, from al-Sha'bī, from the Companion Jābir b. 'Abdallāh, that:

**The Messenger of God bought a camel from me and then let me ride it back to the city.**<sup>9</sup>

From the *Amālī* of the famous Imami Shiite scholar Ibn Bābawayh (d. 381/991) we find a hadith that emphasizes two important themes in Islamic legal and theological discourse: first, religion is not the purview of personal opinion, and, second, God is not to be compared to created beings:

Ibn Bābawayh writes: it was narrated to us by Muhammad b. Mūsā b. al-Mutawakkil: it was narrated to us by 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim: it was narrated by his father, from al-Rayyān b. al-Salt, from the Imam 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Ridā, from his father, from his forefathers, from the Commander of the Faithful 'Alī b. Abī Tālib, that:

The Messenger of God, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, said, **'God said, "He does not believe in Me who interprets My speech [in the Quran] with merely his own opinion. He has not known Me who compares Me with My creation, and he is not in My religion who uses analogical reasoning [in questions of law] in My religion."**'<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in the *Amālī al-sughrā* of the Zaydi Shiite scholar Ahmad b. al-Husayn al-Hārūnī (d. 421/1030) we find a hadith describing the way in which a pious Muslim should view death:

Al-Hārūnī writes: It was reported to us by Abū al-Husayn al-Burūjirdī: it was narrated to us by Abū al-Qāsim al-Baghawī: it was narrated to us by Hudba: it was narrated to us by Hammām, from

Qatāda, from the Companion Anas, from the Companion ‘Ubāda b. al-Sāmit, that:

The Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, said: **‘He who would love to encounter God, God loves encountering him. And he who would dislike encountering God, God dislikes encountering him.’** So Aisha, or another one of the Prophet’s wives, asked, **‘O Messenger of God, but indeed we dislike death.’** The Prophet replied, **‘It is not like that, but rather the believer, when death comes to him, he receives the glad tidings of God’s pleasure and His munificence. So that there is nothing dearer to the believer than what lies ahead of him. Thus he wants to encounter God, and God wants to encounter him. But the unbeliever, when death comes to him, he receives tidings of God’s displeasure and His impending punishment. So there is nothing more hated to him than what lies ahead. Thus he despises meeting God, and God despises meeting him.’**<sup>11</sup>

#### THE NATURE OF MUHAMMAD’S AUTHORITY IN ISLAM

The role of the Prophet Muhammad as a teacher, role model, and living example of the revelation he delivered is discussed in the Quran.<sup>ii</sup> The holy book repeatedly instructs Muslims to ‘Obey God and His prophet’ (Quran 8:1), adding that he was for the Muslims ‘a most goodly example’ (Quran 33:21). Although the Quran reiterates that Muhammad is nothing but a mortal who has merely been favored with direct communication from God, Muslims consider him above any ethical shortcomings. There has been disagreement among Shiite and Sunni Muslims as well as within the two sects as to the degree to which prophets in general are immune from sin, but Muslims agree that after the beginning of his prophetic mission Muhammad was incapable of any serious sin or moral failing. In fact, reports of rare errors or instances of forgetfulness on his part are treated as part of the Prophet’s teachings. The Quran, for example, reprimands Muhammad for turning away in frustration from a blind Muslim who distracted him with a question when he was busy negotiating with his Meccan

<sup>ii</sup> We shall see that in both the classical Islamic and modern periods, this role has been debated; see Chapter 9.

opponents. The Quran uses this as an opportunity to remind the Muslims that one should not prefer influential infidels over sincere, if tactless, believers (Quran 80:1–7). There is even a hadith in which the Prophet states, **‘Indeed I forget or am made to forget so that I may furnish the Sunna.’**<sup>12</sup> Hadiths about mistakes that Muhammad made in prayers, for example, Muslims treat as instructions on how to act when they themselves make those errors.<sup>iii</sup>

No traditional Muslim scholar would ever consider it possible that the Prophet had made a statement or acted out of anger or weakness. When opponents of the Muslims mocked the Companion ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr for recording everything the Prophet said, Muhammad comforted him by saying **‘Write it down, for by Him whose hand holds my soul, nothing comes out of my mouth but the truth.’**<sup>13</sup> As the Quran states, Muhammad ‘does not speak out of his own desires, it is but revelation revealed’ (Quran 53:3–4).

As a mere mortal, Muslims believe that Muhammad had no independent ability to prophesy. He was simply a medium for God’s revelation. Hence, he is made to say in the Quran, ‘I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow what is revealed to me’ (Quran 46:9). But Muslims believe that Muhammad did have access to direct knowledge of the future from God in both the formal revelation of the Quran, which predicts events like Muslim victories over their Meccan opponents, and in private inspirations made known to him alone. Many hadiths therefore describe future events such as the moral decline of humanity or the events that will precede the Day of Judgment. In one famous hadith, the Prophet states that **‘there will not come upon you a time except that the eras coming after it will be worse than it.’**<sup>14</sup>

Hadiths could describe the Prophet’s authoritative legacy in three possible ways: they could communicate Muhammad’s words, or his actions, or describe things done in his presence to which he did not object. The above hadith examples describe Muhammad’s edicts and normative behavior. But Muslim scholars also assumed that anything done during the Prophet’s time that he did not forbid must have been acceptable. The Companion Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh thus reported, ‘We used to practice *coitus interruptus* during the time of the Prophet when the Quran was being revealed.’<sup>15</sup> Muslim scholars thus

<sup>iii</sup> Some Muslim scholars even hold that the Prophet intentionally made these ‘mistakes’ to teach his followers; Qādī ‘Iyād, *Kitāb al-shifā*, p. 342.

interpreted this as a major proof for the permissibility of birth control in Islam.

Although a hadith could refer to any aspect of the Prophet's life and legacy, not everything the Prophet did was authoritative. The Prophet was forty years old when he received his first revelation. Although Muhammad was admired for his upstanding character and integrity even before his mission, Muslims do not consider his teachings authoritative before he received God's sanction. In addition, revelation had not made the Prophet a master of all trades. In one famous hadith, the Prophet came across some farmers trying to graft small date palms. When he suggested that the farmers take a different course of action and that advice proved wrong, he replied, **'I am but a man, if I give you a command regarding religion then take it. But if I make a statement out of my own judgment, then I am but a man ... you are more knowledgeable about the matters of your world.'**<sup>16</sup>

The scope of what concerns 'religion' in the Islamic tradition, however, is much wider than in the modern Western world. Although the Prophet consulted his Companions on affairs of state, governance, and military tactics (in fact, on several occasions the Quran validated his Companions' opinions rather than his own), his decisions as a statesman and military leader have been considered authoritative by Muslim jurists. Were his decisions, after all, not ultimately guided by God?

Certainly, not all aspects of the Prophet's behavior required imitation or obedience. Since the Prophet did not state, for example, that wearing the long robes of an Arab was required dress for a Muslim, this has been viewed as a matter of choice. Injunctions by the Prophet encouraging Muslim men to grow beards, however, have led Muslim jurists to view this as either a requirement or laudable behavior. And while such factors limited the extent to which the Prophet's personal tastes and habits were legally compelling, there has been no limit to *optional* imitation of the Prophet done out of supererogatory piety. Some Muslims thus replicate even the mundane aspects of the Prophet's behavior, such as the position in which he slept and the food he ate. The famous jurist and hadith scholar of Baghdad, Ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855), once claimed that he had acted on every hadith he had heard about the Prophet at least once.<sup>17</sup>

THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK: WHAT DEFINES HADITH LITERATURE?

Stories and reports about the Prophet Muhammad permeate all genres of scholarship and expression in Islamic civilization. Hadiths appear in books of law, theology, Quranic commentary, mysticism, politics, Arabic grammar, history, and etiquette. If we are to be introduced to the hadith tradition, how do we define its scope?

Early Islamic writing combined both pre-Islamic Arab sensitivities and new Islamic concerns. Muslim authors of the eighth and ninth centuries expressed the tribal nature of Arab and early Islamic society by writing books of genealogy (*ansāb*), such as the *Kitāb al-ansāb* of Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819). Other early Muslims gathered and recorded religious folklore from Arab, Jewish, Persian, and Christian sources. The Yemeni Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/732) was one of the most famous authors in this genre, which became known as ‘stories of the prophets (*qasas al-anbiyā*).’ Other early authors collected information about the military campaigns of the early Muslim community and traced its historical course. This genre was known as ‘campaigns (*maghāzī*)’ and ‘historical reports (*tārīkh* or *akhbār*),’ including such works as the *Maghāzī* of Mūsā b. ‘Uqba (d. 141/758). Another important genre combined these fields: the study of the Prophet’s biography, or *sīra*. The most famous biography of Muhammad is the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767). Some early Muslim scholars concentrated on collecting reports about the meaning and contexts of Quranic verses, compiling exegetical books called ‘*tafsīr*.’ Finally, some scholars turned their attention to reports of the Prophet’s legal, ritual, and theological statements. These were known as ‘rulings (*ahkām*)’ and formed the core of the hadith tradition.

The defining characteristic of hadith literature as it emerged in the mid eighth century was that it consisted of reports attributed to Muhammad and transmitted by full *isnāds* from him. Books of Quranic exegesis, history, genealogy, and folklore often included reports from Muhammad or describing his actions. But these represented the minority of their contents. Quranic exegesis most often relied on the opinions of Companions or later Muslims for the meaning of Quranic words. History works frequently described events that occurred decades after Muhammad’s death, such as the Muslim conquests of Syria and Iran. Stories of the prophets involved subjects as distant as Adam and Eve. These genres were distinct from *ahkām*

and the nascent hadith tradition because they were not focused on the persona of Muhammad.

But what about *sīra*, the biography of the Prophet? By definition, this was focused on Muhammad. Here, the second defining characteristic of hadith literature proves key: the *isnād*. The *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq rarely includes full *isnāds* for the stories it tells about the Prophet or its quotations of his words. The *isnāds* that it does include are often incomplete, meaning that the sources that transmitted the report are often omitted or left unnamed.

It was the presence of full *isnāds* leading back to the Prophet and transmitting his legacy that defined the core of hadith literature, what early hadith scholars called the genre of ‘supported reports (*al-musnadāt*).’ Of course, if we open up famous hadith collections such as the *Sahīh* of al-Bukhārī, we find chapters on Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and the Prophet’s campaigns (*maghāzī*). What distinguishes these chapters from separate books of *tafsīr* or *maghāzī*, however, is that the chapters of hadith books focus on reports with full *isnāds* that quote the Prophet instead of later Muslims.

Regardless of their precise subject, any books in Islamic civilization that include hadiths with full *isnāds* back to the Prophet are subsumed under the genre of hadith literature. Of course, later books of hadiths written after the use of *isnāds* became obsolete or books specifically discussing or analyzing aspects of hadiths may not provide full *isnāds*, but their subject matter clearly places them in this genre as well.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 J. Brown, field notes, Sept. 2003.
- 2 This quote is attributed to the famous ninth-century scholar al-Shāfi‘ī.
- 3 J. Brown, field notes, July 2004.
- 4 See Max Rodenbeck’s excellent book, *Cairo: the City Victorious*, p. 111.
- 5 J. Brown, field notes July 2007. This hadith can be found in Muhammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-birr wa al-sila, bāb mā jā’a fī rahmat al-muslimīn*.
- 6 Muhammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-‘ilm, bāb man kadhaba ‘alā al-Nabī*.
- 7 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-tawhīd, bāb qawl Allāh ‘wujūhuhum yawma’idhin nādira.*
- 8 Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-zakāt, bāb al-‘urūd idhā kānat li’l-tijāra hal fihā min zakāt*.

## 14 *Hadith*

- 9 Abū al-Qāsim al-Tabarānī, *al-Muḥjam al-saghīr*, vol. 1 p. 76.
- 10 Ibn Bābawayh, *Amālī al-Sadūq*, p. 6.
- 11 Ahmad b. al-Husayn al-Hārūnī, *al-Amālī al-sughrā*, p. 8.
- 12 *Muwatta'*: *kitāb al-sahw*.
- 13 'Abdallāh b. Abd al-Rahmān al-Dārimī, *Sunan al-Dārimī*: introductory chapters, *bāb man rakkhkhasa fī kitābat al-'ilm*.
- 14 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*: *kitāb al-fitan, bāb lā ya'ī zamān illā alladhī ba'dahu sharr minhu*.
- 15 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*: *kitāb al-nikāh, bāb al-'azl*.
- 16 Muslim b. al-Hajjāj, *Sahīh Muslim*: *kitāb al-fadā'il, bāb wujūb imtithāl mā qālahu shar'an*.
- 17 Al-Khatīb, *al-Jāmi'*, vol. 1, p. 225.