

Introduction to Hadith Terminology

Description: A short introduction to the most common words and terms related to *ahadith* that you will come across in your reading about Islam.

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Objectives

- To understand some common terms related to *ahadith* used in Islamic literature.
- To appreciate that the classification of *ahadith* is a meticulous effort and involves academic discipline.

Arabic Terms

- *Daeef* " weak.
- *Hadith* - (plural " *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Hasan* " good.
- *Isnad* " chain of transmitters of any given *hadith*.
- *Matn* " the text of a *hadith*.
- *Mawdu* " fabricated or forged.
- *Sahabah* - the plural form of "Sahabi," which translates to Companions. A *sahabi*, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who saw Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim
- *Saheeh* " sound, without defect.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.

Introduction

Muslims believe that the second primary source of Islam is the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him. The *Sunnah* is considered to be a revelation and it is contained within the large body of literature known as *ahadith*. The *Quran* and the *Sunnah* cannot be understood correctly without recourse to each other because the *Sunnah* is the practical example of how Prophet Muhammad implemented the *Quran*, in his character and in his day to day life.



This brief lesson aims to give a brief introduction to *hadith* terminology in order that you are not confused by language and terms and feel as if you are reading beyond your depth of understanding. It is neither a course nor an introduction to a course; however, it will introduce terms that you may wish to delve into more deeply.

What makes a saying or story a *hadith*?

When Prophet Muhammad was alive, the people used to go directly to him if there was an issue regarding the practicalities of Islam. After his death, the *sahabah* clarified any problems or resolved disputes. However, as the time went on, it became important to know how the sayings and traditions related to Islam came about. This necessitated knowing who said what and where the saying originated or, the chain of narration. Thus we find that a *hadith* is composed of two parts; the *matn* (text) and the *isnad* (chain of transmitters or narrators or reporters). A text may seem to be logical or reasonable but without a chain of narrators, it is not a *hadith*.

Classification of *Hadith*

The vast amount of *ahadith* that exist today began when the *sahabah* and those who came after them began to memorise, write down, and pass on the statements of Prophet Muhammad and descriptions of his actions. As many outstanding individuals began to collect hundreds of thousands of narrations, it became necessary to find a way to distinguish those reports that were true from those that were false. The methodology that evolved became the science of *hadith*. It sorts genuine sayings from those that are not and classifying them into certain categories.

Hadith classification is a meticulous science and involves strict adherence to the guidelines built up over several centuries. There are many ways to classify *ahadith* and before you read a *hadith* it has gone through several methods of classification, including but not limited to, defects found in the *matn* or *isnad*, how many reporters are there in the *isnad*, or the manner in which the *matn* is reported. However, the most well-known and most visible way is to classify *ahadith* according to the reliability and memory of the reporters. With this method, the *ahadith* are classified as follows. Each *hadith* is said to be

saheeh (sound), *hasan* (good), *da'eef* (weak) or *mawdu* (fabricated or forged).

Saheeh

These is the most authentic and reliable class of *ahadith*. According to *hadith* scholar Ibn As-Salah (1181 -1245 CE), a *saheeh hadith* is one that has a continuous *isnad*, made up of reporters with trustworthy memory and is found to be free from any irregularities in either the *matn* or the *isnad*.

Across the centuries many people collected *ahadith* and compiled them into reference books. The most famous of such collectors are Imam Al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim. These are names that you will often see after a *hadith* has been quoted or in the footnotes. These men are not narrators; rather they are those who spent years compiling and classifying *ahadith* with strict methods and conditions/requirements. They are known to have included only *saheeh ahadith* in their bodies of literature.

The following grading levels are for *saheeh ahadith* only.

1. those which are recorded by both Al-Bukhari and Muslim;
2. those which are recorded by Al-Bukhari only;
3. those which are recorded by Muslim only.

Those which are not found in the above two collections; but

4. which agree with the requirements of both Al-Bukhari and Muslim;
5. which agree with the requirements of Al-Bukhari only;
6. which agree with the requirements of Muslim only; and
7. those declared *saheeh* in other accepted collections.

Hasan

The term *hasan* means good, and Ibn As-Salah describes a *hasan hadith* as one that is a degree less than a *saheeh hadith*. It is free from irregularities in both the *matn* and the *isnad* but one or more of the reporters may have a less reliable memory, or the *hadith* falls short of the strict rules of *saheeh* classification.

Both *saheeh* and *hasan ahadith* can be used to support or make a point of law. Several *ahadith* considered to be *da'eef* can raise each other to the degree of *hasan* if the weakness in the reporters is considered to be mild. However, if the weakness is severe, the *hadith* will remain *da'eef*.

Da'eef

A *hadith* that fails to reach the status of *hasan* is known as *da'eef*. Usually, the weakness is a broken *isnad* or that one or more of the reporters have a character defect.

He or she may be known to tell lies, make excessive mistakes, oppose the narrations of a more reliable source, be involved in innovation, or have some other ambiguity of character.

Mawdu

A *mawdu hadith* is one that is either fabricated or forged. The *matn* of a *mawdu hadith* usually goes against established norms or contains some error or discrepancy in the dates or times of a particular incident. There are however many reasons why *ahadith* were fabricated and these include, political animosity, fabrication by storytellers, proverbs turned into *ahadith*, personal prejudices and deliberate misleading propaganda.

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