

The Science of Hadith

Lesson 1



The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- All Muslims are in agreement that the Holy Quran is the first and foremost source of Islamic knowledge.
- The Quran represents the literal word of God and, unlike the scriptures revealed to previous prophets, it is divinely guarded from distortion and adulteration

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

“Indeed, it is We who sent down the Quran and indeed, We will be its guardian.” Quran

15:9

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Large portions of the Islamic legal, theological, and popular religious traditions come not from the Quran but rather through the legacy of the Holy Prophet (saw). In Shia Islam, this legacy would include Lady Fatima and the 12 Imams as they are considered the official preservers of the prophetic way.
- It is in his teachings that we find Muslim dress code, and the method of offering prayers etc.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- The normative legacy of the Prophet is known as the Sunnah, 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 the Sunnah ruled over the Quran, shaping, specifying, and adding to the revealed book
- The Quran in the following verses asserts the authority of the Sunnah.

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وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمُ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا

“And whatever the Messenger has given you - take; and what he has forbidden you - refrain from.” Quran 59:7

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وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ إِن هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ

*“He does not speak out of his own desires.
It is nothing but inspired revelation.” Quran
53:3-4*

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“And We revealed to you the Remembrance so that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them and that they might reflect.” Quran 16:44

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- For much of Islamic history, the unit through which the Sunnah was preserved, transmitted and understood has been the hadith.
- Think of the Sunnah as a brick house with each brick representing a hadith.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Unlike the Quran, the hadiths, generally speaking, were not quickly and concisely compiled during and immediately after the Prophet's death.
- 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 that the Prophet said and did.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- 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 manipulate the authority of the Sunnah.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- The tool that Muslim scholars developed to help ensure the authenticity of hadiths was the **إِسْنَاد** “isnaad”, or the chain of transmitters through which a scholar traced the **مَتْن** “matn”, or text, of a hadith back to the Prophet (or any of the infallibles of the Ahlul Bayt according to the Shia tradition)

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- The isnaad was an effort to document that a hadith actually came from the Holy Prophet (saw) and his Ahlul Bayt, and Muslim scholars from the eighth century until today have never ceased repeating the following mantra:

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إِنِ الْإِسْنَادُ مِنَ الدِّينِ، وَلَوْ لَا الْإِسْنَادُ لَقَالَ مَنْ شَاءَ مَا شَاءَ

‘The isnaad is part of the religion-if not for the isnaad, whoever wanted could say whatever they wanted.’

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- The Prophet's words, however, have always been more than just a type of proof used in discussions of Islamic law and theology.
- For the Muslim scholarly class, tracing the isnaad of a hadith back to the Prophet is to follow one's genealogy of sacred knowledge back to its source.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Tracing the isnaad of a hadith back to the Prophet and his Ahlul Bayt was a medium of connection to those chosen by God
- Even today, reciting one's isnaad is to walk back in memory through the pantheon corridor of great scholars whose labors had built up Islamic tradition.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- 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 isnaad tradition.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- The Holy Prophet's mission lasted 23 years from 610 CE when he received revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel in a cave outside Mecca, to his death in 632 CE as the head of a powerful Islamic state in Medina.
- During his career as a prophet and leader, there was no courtroom stenographer meticulously recording his every word and furnishing an official transcript of his orders, religious edicts, or everyday speech.

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- Instead, the generation of Muslims who lived with the Prophet, known as the Companions or **الصحابة**, sought to preserve the Prophet'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

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Each hadith, or report about the Prophet, consists of a text (matn) describing his words or actions, and a chain of transmission (isnaad) 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.

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- 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 'hadith' or by the term 'tradition' and the various chains of transmission of this tradition.

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- 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.

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- For example, it is transmitted from the Companion Abdullah b. al-Zubayr that the Prophet said,

مَنْ كَذَبَ عَلَيَّ، فَلْيَتَّبِعْهُ مَقْعَدَهُ مِنَ النَّارِ.

‘Whoever misrepresents me, let him prepare for himself a seat in Hellfire.’

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- But the mainstream narrations of this tradition, from many Companions like Anas b. Malik, Ibn Mas'ud and Abu Hurayra, quote the Prophet saying:

من كذب عليّ متعمداً فليتبوأ مقعده من النار

‘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 Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Hadiths could describe the Prophet and his Ahlul Bayt's authoritative legacy in three ways:
 - 1. They could communicate their words
 - 2. They could communicate their actions
 - 3. They could communicate their silent approval. Essentially describing things done in their presence to which they did not object thus indicating the permissibility of the action.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Muslim scholars assume that anything done during the Prophet's time that he did not forbid must have been acceptable.
- The Companion Jabir b. Abdallah thus reported, **'We used to practice coitus interruptus during the time of the Prophet when the Quran was being revealed.'**
- Some Muslim scholars thus interpreted this as a major proof for the permissibility of birth control in Islam.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- **What defines hadith literature?**
- The defining characteristic of hadith literature as it emerged in the mid eighth century was that it consisted of reports attributed to the Prophet and transmitted by full isnaads from him.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- Books of Quranic exegesis, history, genealogy, and folklore often include reports from the Prophet or describing his actions. But these represent the minority of their contents.
- Quranic exegesis most often relied on the opinions of Companions or later Muslims for the meaning of Quranic words

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- What about the books on the biography of the Prophet? By definition they chronicled the words and actions of the Prophet. Do they qualify as hadith literature?
- The Seerah of Ibn Ishaq rarely includes full isnaads for the stories it tells about the Prophet or its quotations of his words. The isnaads that it does include are often incomplete

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- It was the presence of full isnaads 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’ مُسْنَدَات “musnadaat”

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- **Defining Hadith Qudsi**
- Refers to a saying (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad in which the meaning is revealed by God and the phrasing is formulated by the Prophet
- Unlike prophetic hadith (hadith nabawi), the chain of transmission is traced back directly to God instead of ending with the Prophet

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- In contrast to the Quran, which is considered divine revelation in both meaning and wording, the authenticity of sacred hadith varies from one narration to another, and they may not be recited in prayer. They function as extra-Quranic revelation.

The Definition and Significance of Hadith

- **Recommendations for narrating hadith**

- اَعْرِفُوا مَنَازِلَ النَّاسِ مِنَّا عَلَى قَدْرِ رِوَايَاتِهِمْ عَنَّا

“Know the status of people to us according to their narrations from us.” - Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq

Source: .Bihar al-Anwar v.2, p. 150

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اللَّهُمَّ ارْحَمْ خُلَفَائِي - ثَلَاثًا - قِيلَ : يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، وَمَنْ خُلَفَاؤُكَ
؟ قَالَ : الَّذِينَ يَبْلُغُونَ حَدِيثِي وَسُنَّتِي ، ثُمَّ يُعَلِّمُونَهَا أُمَّتِي

'O God! Have mercy on my successors'-thrice. He was asked, 'O Messenger of Allah! Who are your successors?' He said, 'Those who learn my traditions and practices, and then teach them to my community.'"
– The Holy Prophet (saw)

Source: Amali al-Saduq, p. 152,

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الرَّائِيَةُ لِلْحَدِيثِ الْمُتَفَقِّهُ فِي الدِّينِ أَفْضَلُ مِنْ أَلْفِ عَابِدٍ لَا فِقْهَ لَهُ
وَلَا رِوَايَةَ

“The narrator of traditions who understands religion is better than a thousand worshippers who have neither understanding of religion nor knowledge of traditions.”-

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq

Source: Amali al-Saduq, p. 152,

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- **Recommendations for writing hadith**

- A man from the Ansar used to attend the sessions of the Prophet (saw), listen to his sermons in awe, yet he could never remember the sermons of the Prophet (saw) after he left. When he complained to the Prophet (saw), the Prophet (saw) said pointing to the man's hand

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استعن بيمينك ، وأوماً بيده ، أي خطّ

“Seek the help of your hand i.e. write my words down.”

Source: Bihar al-Anwar, v.2, p.152

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مَنْ كَتَبَ عَنِّي عِلْمًا أَوْ حَدِيثًا لَمْ يَزَلْ يُكْتَبُ لَهُ الْأَجْرُ مَا بَقِيَ ذَلِكَ
الْعِلْمُ وَالْحَدِيثُ

“Whoever writes knowledge or a narration on my authority, a reward will continuously be written for him as long as that knowledge and narration exists.”- The Holy Prophet (saw)

Source: Kanzul Ummal, hadith 28951

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- **Recommendations for the memorization of forty hadith**

مَنْ حَفِظَ عَلَى أُمَّتِي أَرْبَعِينَ حَدِيثًا يَنْتَفِعُونَ بِهَا فِي أَمْرِ دِينِهِمْ ،
بَعَثَهُ اللَّهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَقِيهًا عَالِمًا

“Whoever memorizes forty traditions from which my community benefits in their religious affairs, Allah will raise him on the Day of Resurrection as a learned jurist and a scholar.”- The Holy Prophet (saw)

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- **The tradition of the earlier learned Muslims:**
- Jabir b. Abdullah al-Ansari heard that Abdullah b. Anas has heard a hadith from the Prophet (saw) concerning being unfair to people, the hadith that Jabir had no knowledge of.
- He purchased a camel and travelled for a month to find Abdullah in Damascus only to hear the hadith directly from Abdullah and return home!