The History and Importance of the Hadiths

What the Hadiths are, how they were collected and checked, the earliest collections, the main compilers, the six Sunni and four Shi'a collections, and their place in Islamic law alongside the Qur'an, consensus and analogy.

What are the Hadiths?

A **Hadith** (plural *ahadith*) is a **report of the words, actions or silent approval of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)**. The **Sunnah** is the Prophet's way (the practice shown by the Hadiths). The Hadiths explain and apply the Qur'an: for example, the Qur'an commands prayer, and the Hadiths teach **how to pray**.

Each Hadith has two parts:

- **The *isnad*** (chain): the list of narrators who passed the report on, from the Companion who heard it to the compiler.
- **The *matn*** (text): the words or description of the action.

The history of the compilation

Stage	Details
In the Prophet's lifetime	The Companions **memorised** his teaching. Some **wrote** it down, such as **Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-As** (his *al-Sahifa as-Sadiqah*). The Prophet (pbuh) at first limited writing, so that it would not be mixed with the Qur'an, but later allowed it
After his death	The Companions (**Abu Hurayrah, Aishah, Anas ibn Malik, Abdullah ibn Umar, Ibn Abbas** and others) **narrated** the Hadiths. The first Caliphs required **proof** for reports. **Hammam ibn Munabbih** wrote down Abu Hurayrah's Hadiths in his *Sahifah*
The first collections	In the time of the Umayyad Caliph **Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz** (about 100 AH), scholars such as **Ibn Shihab az-Zuhri** were told to **collect** Hadiths so that they would not be lost
Growth of false reports	Political and sectarian quarrels, and the spread of Islam into new lands, led some to **invent Hadiths** to support their views. Scholars therefore created strict **methods to test** reports
The classical period (about 800–900 CE)	The **great collections** were written, especially the **Six Sunni books**

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The stages of preservation in more detail

1. In the Prophet's lifetime. After the Hijrah he encouraged his Companions to **memorise and pass on** his teaching ("let those present tell those absent", Farewell Sermon). He had some Companions **write agreements, letters and treaties**: a written pledge of protection for Suraqah, the Hudaybiyyah treaty (written by Ali), letters to kings, and a record of his Makka sermon that he allowed a man from Yemen, **Abu Shah**, to write. Early on he asked people not to write down his sayings, so that they would not be mixed with the Qur'an which was still being revealed. When this risk had passed he allowed it.

2. After his death. The Companions became the teachers of the next generation. The ones who narrated the **most** were often the **youngest** or those who stayed closest to him, not the oldest. Abu Bakr narrated about 140, Umar and Ali about 540 each. The largest numbers are for **Abu Hurayrah** (about 5,300), **Abdullah ibn Umar** (about 2,600), **Anas ibn Malik** (about 2,300), **Aishah** (about 2,200), **Ibn Abbas** (about 1,660) and **Ibn Mas'ud** (about 850). **Umm Salamah** narrated about 380. Aishah also corrected Hadiths that others reported wrongly.

3. The Successors (*tabi'un*). The next generation wrote notes in pages (*suhuf*). The sheet (*sahifah*) of **Hammam ibn Munabbih**, with 138 Hadiths from Abu Hurayrah, has survived. Hadiths were often taught by **speaking**, since early Arabic writing had no dots or vowels and could be misread. The Umayyad Caliph **Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz** (about 100 AH) told the governor of Madina and scholars such as **az-Zuhri** to write down the Hadiths so they would not be lost.

4. The following generation (second to early fourth century AH). This was the great age of collecting, producing the *musannaf* books, the *musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the "Six Books".

Why were the Hadiths collected?

- The Prophet had been the final authority, and Muslims needed written guidance to settle disputes after his death.
- The Companions who had heard him were dying.
- New converts needed guidance on the Prophet's way of life.
- The law (*fiqh*), including ijma' and qiyas, needed a reliable body of Hadiths.
- Mistakes could creep into **oral** reports.
- After the civil wars some people, including **rulers' supporters, over-zealous preachers and enemies of Islam**, had made up false Hadiths.
- The Qur'an itself calls the Prophet a "beautiful example" (33:21).

The earliest collections

- **Early written sheets** (*sahifahs*) of Companions and their students.
- **The Muwatta'** of **Imam Malik ibn Anas** (d. 795), the earliest surviving major book, which joins **Hadiths with the legal rulings** of Madina.

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- **Musannaf** collections, arranged by **subject** (as a law book), such as those of **Abd ar-Razzaq** and **Ibn Abi Shaybah**.
- **Musnad** collections, arranged by the **name of the Companion** who narrated, such as the huge **Musnad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal** (d. 855).

The main compilers and their activities

The Six Collections of Sunni Hadiths (al-Kutub as-Sittah):

Collection	Compiler	Notes
Sahih al-Bukhari	**Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari** (810–870)	Selected about **7,000** Hadiths (about 2,600 without repetition) from some **600,000** he examined. He travelled widely, and used very **strict conditions**. Often called the **most authentic book after the Qur'an**
Sahih Muslim	**Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj** (about 821–875)	Also very strict; arranged clearly with **chains together**. Together with al-Bukhari these are the **"two Sahihs"**
Sunan Abu Dawud	**Abu Dawud** (d. 889)	Strong on **legal Hadiths**
Jami' at-Tirmidhi	**at-Tirmidhi** (d. 892)	Comments on the **grade** of each Hadith and on legal opinion
Sunan an-Nasa'i	**an-Nasa'i** (d. 915)	Strict, short, on law
Sunan Ibn Majah	**Ibn Majah** (d. 887)	The sixth; includes some weaker reports

The Four Collections of Shi'a Hadiths (al-Kutub al-Arba'ah): these include reports from the **Prophet and the Imams of his family**.

Collection	Compiler
al-Kafi	**al-Kulayni** (d. about 940)
Man la yahduruhu al-faqih	**Ibn Babawayh (as-Saduq)** (d. 991)
Tahdhib al-Ahkam	**at-Tusi** (d. 1067)
al-Istibsar	**at-Tusi**

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The collections in more detail

- **Musannaf** books are arranged **by subject** (prayer, zakat, inheritance), like a law book. The **Muwatta'** of Imam Malik (about 1,700 Hadiths with the practice of Madina) belongs to this type, as does the Musannaf of Abd ar-Razzaq. They are useful to ordinary Muslims and to scholars of law.
- **Musnad** books are arranged **by Companion** (the Musnad of Abu Bakr, Ali, Abu Hurayrah, Aishah and so on) and begin with the closest Companions. The **Musnad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal** (founder of the Hanbali school) chose about 27,000 Hadiths from some 750,000. A musnad helps scholars **trace the chain** of a Hadith but is hard for ordinary readers to use for a topic.
- **The Six Books:**

Book	Notes
al-Bukhari	Worked for about **16 years** and chose the Hadiths for his *Sahih* from some **600,000**, arranged under about 97 headings. The Sunni scholars rank it first
Muslim	His *Sahih* groups all narrations of a Hadith in one place, with fewer comments than Bukhari
Abu Dawud	A pupil of Ahmad ibn Hanbal; chose about **4,800** from 500,000, with a strong focus on the law
at-Tirmidhi	A pupil of al-Bukhari; states the grade of each Hadith and compares the opinions of the law schools
an-Nasa'i	Few weak Hadiths among the six, after the two Sahihs
Ibn Majah	Counted as the sixth; contains some **1,300** Hadiths not in the others

- **The four Shi'a books** rely mainly on reports from the **Prophet and the twelve Imams**, and were compiled between the mid-fourth and mid-fifth centuries AH. **al-Kafi** (over 16,000 Hadiths, in three parts: the principles of the faith, practice and law, and the miscellaneous *Rawdah*), **Man la yahduruhu al-faqih** (about 9,000), and **Tahdhib al-Ahkam** and **al-Istibsar** (the second a shorter version of the first on the same law topics).

Testing the reliability of a Hadith

The scholars made **hadith criticism** (*'ilm al-hadith*) to separate sound from weak or false reports:

- **Examining the isnad (the chain).** Was each narrator **known**, **trustworthy and honest**, with a **good memory**, and could he really have **met** the person he narrated from (an **unbroken chain**)? Books on narrators (*'ilm ar-rijal*) record their lives and character.
- **Examining the matn (the text).** Does it **agree with the Qur'an**, with other sound Hadiths, with reason and with history? Is the style fitting for the Prophet (pbuh)?
- **Multiple chains.** A report passed by so many people that agreement on a lie is impossible is **mutawatir** (certain); one with fewer is **ahad**.

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Grades of Hadith (Sunni):

Grade	Meaning
Sahih	**Sound**: unbroken chain of reliable narrators, with no defect
Hasan	**Good**: slightly lower accuracy than *sahih*
Da'if	**Weak**: a break in the chain or a doubtful narrator
Mawdu'	**Fabricated** (invented), to be rejected

The tests of a Hadith in more detail

Testing the chain (*isnad*). A sound chain needs:

- the first narrator to be a **Companion** who heard or saw the Prophet;
- an **unbroken chain** where each narrator really met the one before (the scholars checked **birth and death dates**);
- each narrator to be an **honest and upright Muslim**, so a narrator known to lie was dropped (Imam Malik refused to take reports from a man who was dishonest in daily life);
- each narrator to be **old enough to understand** what he reports, so reports by children were not accepted;
- each narrator to have a **good memory** and report what agrees with other reliable narrators;
- **non-Muslims** not to be accepted as narrators.

For example, in the chain "Ibn al-Muthanna from Abd al-Wahhab, from Ayyub, from Abu Qilabah, from Malik, that the Prophet said, 'Pray as you see me praying'", the list of names is the *isnad*, and "Pray as you see me praying" is the *matn*. A shorter chain is generally stronger because there are fewer links.

Testing the text (*matn*). A text was doubted if it:

- contradicted the **Qur'an**, **sound Hadiths** or the main principles of Islam;
- was against **reason, nature or known history**;
- insulted the Prophet's family or the Companions;
- was admitted by its narrator to be invented;
- described a **public event** that only one person reported, when many would have seen it;
- promised a **huge reward for a trivial act** or a heavy punishment for a small fault;
- used language that did not suit the Prophet.

Grades in more detail.

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- **Sahih:** an unbroken chain of honest narrators with sound memory, and a text that is not faulty. The Hadiths of al-Bukhari and Muslim are accepted as sahih.
- **Hasan:** the text is accepted but the chain falls a little short (a narrator with a slightly weaker memory, or a narrator little known).
- **Da'if (weak):** a gap in the chain or a narrator whose honesty or memory is doubtful. Weak Hadiths were not always rejected: some scholars used them for encouragement in good conduct when there was nothing against them.
- **Mawdu' (fabricated):** invented and **never used**; for example "ordinary people follow the religion of their rulers".
- By number of narrators: **mutawatir** reports, passed by so many that agreement on a lie is impossible (the Last Sermon is an example), and **ahad** reports, passed by fewer.

Why is the *isnad* so important? It proves the report really goes back to the Prophet and protects the law and religious practice from invented material. Muslims depend on Hadiths for the details of the pillars, so errors would spoil their worship.

Why did the Prophet at first forbid writing his sayings? Writing the Hadiths beside the revelation could have mixed them with the Qur'an. He allowed it when the Companions could tell them apart.

Why classify Hadiths? Only the soundest should be used for law, but weaker ones may be used for moral encouragement, so graded reports can be used correctly.

Which collection is more useful? *Musannaf* books for ordinary readers and new Muslims who want a topic; *musnad* books for scholars checking authenticity.

Their use in legal thinking

The **Hadiths (the Sunnah)** are the **second source of law** after the Qur'an. They **explain** general Qur'anic rules (such as the number of rak'ahs in prayer, the rates of zakat, the rituals of Hajj), give **new rulings** where the Qur'an is silent, and show how to **apply** principles. They are used with **ijma' (consensus)** and **qiyas (analogy)**. If a Hadith appears to contradict the Qur'an, the Qur'an is followed.

> NOTE
>
> **Shi'a** scholars also accept the sayings and actions of the **Imams** of the Prophet's family as part of the Sunnah.

The Hadiths as a source of law

- The Qur'an commands obedience to the Prophet: "Whoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed God" (4:80). The Prophet said he was leaving **two things**: the **Book of God and his Sunnah**.

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- The Hadiths explain what the Qur'an leaves general: the details of **prayer, zakat, fasting and Hajj**, and the rules of **trade, contracts and inheritance** (see chapter 2 for five examples).
- Ijma' and qiyas depend on the Hadiths and are used only when the Qur'an and Hadiths do not answer.
- A Hadith qudsi is the Prophet reporting God's words in his own wording; it is not part of the Qur'an.
- **Can Islam be practised without the Hadiths?** No. The Qur'an orders prayer, but only the Hadiths show how many rak'ahs and how to pray.

Significance of the Hadiths

- They give a **detailed picture of the Prophet's life and character** and a **model for daily life**.
- They **explain the Qur'an** and are essential for **worship and law**.
- They are the base of the **Islamic sciences** (jurisprudence, history, biography).
- The care in preserving them is a **model of historical method**.

> **Remember: isnad = chain; matn = text. Bukhari and Muslim are the most reliable (*sahih*). Musnad = arranged by narrator; musannaf = arranged by subject.**

> **TRY IT**
>
> Explain how scholars tested the reliability of a Hadith. Why was this necessary?

Outline. *Why:* false Hadiths were invented after the Prophet's death for political and sectarian reasons, as the community grew. *How:* checking the isnad (honesty, memory and an unbroken chain of narrators, with biographical books on narrators), checking the matn (agreement with the Qur'an and other sound Hadiths), grading reports (sahih, hasan, da'if, mawdu'). *Result:* the Six Sunni and Four Shi'a collections, with Bukhari and Muslim as the most trusted.

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