A ḥadīth (pl. aḥādīth) is a report of something that our beloved Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ did, said or consented to. The word khabar (pl. akhbār) is also used to refer to these reports.¹

Scholars have taken great care to preserve these narrations, because being rightly guided and correctly understanding the Qurʾān are dependent on the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ. Allāh ﷻ explains:

- Obey Allāh, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, [know that the Messenger] is only responsible for the duty placed upon him, and you are responsible for the duty placed on you. If you obey [the Messenger], you will be rightly guided. The Messenger’s duty is only to deliver the message clearly.²

- We have sent down the message to you, [Prophet,] so that you can explain to people everything that was sent to them, so that they may reflect.³

**Text and Transmission Chains**

As explained by the great ḥadīth scholar ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak ﷺ, “Transmissions chains (isnād) are part of the religion [of Islam]. Had it not been for isnād, anyone could say whatever they want [about the religion].”⁴

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¹ This article is adapted from *Nukhbat al-IFikr* (The Top Opinion) by Ḥāfiẓ ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī r

² *Sūrat al-Nūr* 24:54

³ *Sūrat al-Nahl* 16:44

⁴ *Ṣahīh Muslim* 32
The text (matn) of each ḥadīth is passed down through a series of reporters that form its transmission chain (isnād or sanad, pl. asānīd). When cited, this chain begins with the last reporter who documented the ḥadīth and ends at the source, whether that source is ultimately the Prophet ﷺ, one of his companions (ṣaḥābah), or a member of the second generation of Muslims (tābiʿī).⁶

Subject of the Ḥadīth

Depending on the final subject of its chain, a ḥadīth is either categorized as:

- Elevated Tradition (marfūʿ), if it reports the statements, activities or consent of Allāh’s Messenger ﷺ, or
- Citation (athar), if it reports the statements, activities or consent of another Muslim.

A marfūʿ narration is considered:

- Supported (musnad), if it was reported by a ṣaḥābī, and the transmission chain apparently has no reporter omitted,
- Delegated (mursal), if it was reported by a tābiʿī, or
- Problematic (muʿḍal), if two or more consecutive reporters are missing from the middle of the transmission chain.
- Suspended (muʿallaq), if the reporter recording the ḥadīth in his compilation omits anywhere from one reporter from its isnād to the entire isnād altogether.

There are two types of athar narrations:

- Discontinued (mawqūf), if it reports the statements, activities or consent of a ṣaḥābī, and
- Disconnected (maqṭūʿ), if it reports the statements, activities or consent of a tābiʿī.

Number of Narrators

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⁵ A ṣaḥābī (pl. ṣaḥābah) is a person who met the Prophet ﷺ as a believer and passed away with belief (īmān), even if they left the faith at some point during their life.

⁶ A tābiʿī (pl. tābiʿūn) is a person who met a ṣaḥābī as a believer and passed away with īmān, even if they left the faith at some point during their life.
Over the centuries, Muslim scholars and researchers have dedicated tremendous efforts to verify the historical authenticity of the aḥādīth. Ḥadīth scholars initially sort aḥādīth into two groups, based on the number of narrators:

1. Continuous mass transmission (mutawātir)
2. Individual transmission (āḥād)

**Continuous Mass Transmission (Mutawātir)**

A *mutawātir* narration is one that:

1. Has been reported by so many people that it is impossible for them to have fabricated it, whether intentionally or unintentionally,
2. Has a consistent number of reporters from the beginning to the end of its transmission chain,
3. Was eye-witnessed by the original reporters, and
4. Convinces the recipient of the report that the incident really occurred.

In terms of authenticity, *mutawātir* reports are considered to be as reliable as the Qurʾān itself.

**Individual Transmission (Āḥād)**

A *āḥād* narration is one whose reporters are not as numerous as *mutawātir*. There are three types of *āḥād* narrations:

1. Well-Known (*mashʿhūr*), if it has at least three separate transmission chains,
2. Valuable (ʿazīz), if it has at least two reporters in its transmission chains in every generation, and
3. Irregular (gharīb), if it is reduced to a single reporter at any point in its transmission chain(s).

There are two types of *gharīb* reports:

1. Single recipient (*fard al-muṭlaq*), if it was reported by only one ṭābiʿī from a particular ṣaḥābī. If another report of the same incident is found that leads back to this same ṣaḥābī, then this new transmission chain is called *mutābiʿ*. If it links to a different ṣaḥābī, it is called *shāhid*.
2. Single in relation (*fard al-nisbi*), if it was reduced to a single reporter anywhere in its transmission chain(s) apart from its beginning, e.g. three ṭābiʿūn reported a narration from a particular ṣaḥābī, however only one person received the report from all these three.
Acceptability of Āḥād Reports

Because a āḥād report comes to us through much fewer sources, it cannot be assumed to be as reliable as a mutawātir report. Each ḥadīth must be scrutinized before it can be accepted (maqbuł) or rejected (mardūd).

Criteria for Acceptance

There are four types of āḥād reports that are maqbuł:

1. Intrinsically authentic (ṣaḥīḥ li-dhātih)
2. Intrinsically good (ḥasan li-dhātih)
3. Extrinsically authentic (ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrih)
4. Extrinsically good (ḥasan li-ghayrih)

To be accepted as ṣaḥīḥ li-dhātih or ḥasan li-dhātih, a narration must:

1. Be reported by a chain of honourable individuals
2. Be reported with its complete transmission chain without any reporter being omitted from it
3. Not contain any subtle defect (ʿilal)
4. Not be inconsistent (shādh) with the accounts of other reporters of the same status.

To qualify as ṣaḥīḥ, the reporters of the ḥadīth must be known to possess excellent retention skills. In the case of a ḥasan narration, the memory of its reporters is commendable but not at par with the reporters of a ṣaḥīḥ li-dhātih report.

If a ḥasan li-dhātih report is corroborated by other transmission chains reporting the same account, its status is upgraded to ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrih.

Lastly, a ḥasan li-ghayrih narration is essentially a weak (daʿīf) ḥadīth, however it is corroborated by other chains of transmission reporting the same account thus upgrading its status.

Additions to the Text

If a āḥād report contains additional information that is not found in similar accounts of other reliable and authentic reporters, then the textual addition is considered:
1. Accepted (*maqbul*), if it does not contradict the accounts of the stronger narrators who did not include it in their version.

2. Inconsistent (*shadh*), if it is reported by a reliable narrator, yet it contradicts the well-preserved (*mahfuz*) accounts of stronger reporters.

3. Disapproved (*munkar*), if it is reported by an unreliable narrator and contradicts the well-known (*ma’ruf*) accounts of stronger reporters.

Reconciling Contradictions

If a *aḥād* report is *maqbul* and does not contradict any other *ḥadīth*, it is classified as accurate (*muḥkam*).

If multiple reports seem to contradict one another on a given incident, then each one is called a differing report (*mukhtalaf al-ḥadīth*), provided that the *aḥādīth* can be reconciled. For example, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said, “There is no such thing as contagion and omens of bad luck.” Yet he is also reported to have said, “Run from a leper as you would run from a lion.” Scholars have reconciled these two reports by explaining that no illness has the independent power to infect. Whether the disease spreads to another person or not, this is purely subject to Allāh’s will. However, we should be careful around people who have what is termed as an infectious disease to protect ourselves from thinking that the disease is from the person rather than the command of Allāh, if we get infected.

If these conflicting *aḥādīth* cannot be reconciled, then they will be dealt with in other ways. They will be classified as:

1. Abrogating (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*), when the dates and sequence of both *aḥādīth* are known. The later Islamic practice will take precedence over the earlier.

2. Superior (*rājiḥ*) and inferior (*marjūḥ*), when the dates and sequence of the reports are not known, however one *ḥadīth* is preferred over the other due to a particular criteria.

3. Uncorroborated (*mutawaqqaf fīh*), when neither account can be abrogated by timeline, nor can one be preferred over the other.

Types of Contradictory Reports

Reports classified as contradictory are of six types:

1. Insertion in the transmission chain (*mudraj al-īsnād*), if the contradiction is due to certain inconsistencies found in a report’s transmission chain. There are four types of inconsistencies:
a. Several reporters narrate the same ḥadīth through different transmission chains. A later reporter narrates their ḥadīth without separately listing each independent chain. Instead, he erroneously mentions only one of the chains and links the other reporters to it.

b. A reporter narrates the text of one complete ḥadīth with one transmission chain and a fragment of a second ḥadīth with another chain. A later reporter then erroneously reports both texts from him through the first of the two mentioned transmission chains only. Another scenario would be that the later reporter learns part of a ḥadīth from his teacher and learns the other part from a classmate. He then erroneously reports the ḥadīth without mentioning the intermediate classmate in his chain and instead attributes the complete text to his teacher.

c. A reporter narrates two complete and separate aḥādīth with their independent transmission chains. A later reporter then erroneously reports both aḥādīth from him through only one of the two chains, or he reports one of the two aḥādīth from him with its chain and adds words to it from the text of the second ḥadīth.

d. While a reporter is citing his transmission chain, he is interrupted and consequently utters something. Some of his students assume that this utterance is part of the chain and erroneously report it to others.

2. Insertion in the text (mudraj al-matan), if certain words are added to the text of the ḥadīth that are not part of it. The additional words are sometimes found in the beginning of the ḥadīth, sometimes in the middle, but most often at the end.

3. Inverted (maqlūb), if the name of one person in the text or transmission chain of the ḥadīth is rearranged and reversed.

4. Addition in a connected transmission chain (al-mazīd fī muttaṣil al-Iasānīd), if a reporter has been added to the transmission chain, and his name is not found in the same chain reported by a stronger reporter.

5. Complex (muḍṭarab), if the contradiction is due to an irreconcilable difference between two narrations, and preference cannot be given to one over the other. This form of contradiction normally occurs in transmission chains and seldom in the text of the ḥadīth.

6. Misspelled (muṣ′ḥaf), if the contradiction is due to one or more dots (nuqaṭ) being added to or removed from an Arabic letter in one version of the text. On the other hand, if the difference is due to one or more Arabic letters (ḥurūf) being altered, the ḥadīth will be classified as distorted (muḥarraf).
Criteria for Rejection

A āḥād report is rejected (mardūd) when defects are found in either its transmission chain or in one or more of its reporters.

Faulty Transmission Chains

Faults and omissions found in a ḥadīth’s isnād are either:

1. Evident, when historical documents confirm that two successive reporters in the chain never actually met or communicated with each other, or
2. Subtle, when such inconsistencies are not so easily detected.

There are four evident omissions that can be found in a transmission chain. A report is classified as:

1. Unsupported (muʿallaq), when the final reporter who recorded the ḥadīth in his compilation omitted a previous reporter from the chain or omitted the entire chain.
2. Delegated (mursal), when a tābiʿī omits the name of the ṣaḥābī from whom he heard the report and says, for example, “Allah’s Messenger  said, [...]”
3. Problematic (muʿḍal), when two or more consecutive reporters are missing from the middle of the isnād.
4. Broken (munqaṭiʿ), when one or more non-consecutive reporters are missing from the middle of the isnād.

If the omissions in the transmission chain are subtle, they will be categorized as:

1. Misleading (mudallas), when a reporter does not provide the name of the reporter he acquired the account from, giving the impression that he received it directly from the teacher of this omitted reporter, or
2. Hidden transmitter (mursal al-ikhāfī), when the reporter narrates the account from a contemporary he actually never met, which means there was one or more intermediate transmitter we are unaware of.

Faulty Reporters

A ḥadīth is mardūd when one or more of its reporters have been criticized. There are several types of mardūd ḥadīth:
1. Fabricated (mawḍūʿ), when a reporter in its isnād is confirmed to have deliberately fabricated aḥādīth.

2. Abandoned (matrūk), when a reporter in its isnād is accused or suspected of fabricating aḥādīth.

3. Disapproved (munkar), when a narrator in its isnād is often careless and cites their aḥādīth inaccurately or is an overt sinner (fāsiq).

4. Defective (muʿallal), when a reporter in its isnād inaccurately cites the ḥadīth text or transmission chain due to an inadvertent error (wahm).

A ḥadīth is also mardūd when its isnād has:

1. An unknown (maj'hūl) reporter. The reporter's identity is uncertain, either because they are cited with a less common name or they are not well-known.7

2. A reporter who is involved in an activity in the name of religion that has no basis in the sacred texts (bid'ah) and is actively promoting it.8

3. A reporter who makes frequent mistakes because of having a poor memory (sūʾ al-Iḥifẓ), due to a temporary (ṭārī) or permanent (lāzim) condition.

4. A reporter whose narrations contradict the reports of sound and authentic narrators.

**Types of Ḥadīth Sourcebooks**

**Jāmiʿ**

This collection records narrations on the topics of Qur'ānic exegesis (tafsīr), the Islamic belief system (ʿaqīdah), social etiquettes (ādāb), Islamic regulations (aḥkām), battles (maghāzī) and virtues of the Ṣaḥābah (manāqib), signs of Doomsday (ashrāt), and the disasters of the end times (fitan).

Examples: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī

**Sunan**

7 If they are not well-known and only one person has reported from them, they will be classified as an ‘unknown source’ (maj'hūl al-ʿayn). If two or more narrators report from them, and scholars don’t know whether or not they are a trustworthy source, they will be classified as ‘concealed’ (mastūr).

8 If the activity renders its perpetrator a non-believer (kāfir), then their reports will be rejected. If it simply renders them a sinner and they are not actually advocating the activity, then their reports will be accepted.
This book consists of ḥādīth pertaining to Islamic law (fiqh). The chapters are organized by theme, similar to the books of Islamic jurisprudence, for example cleanliness, prayer, etc.

Examples: Sunan Abū Dāwūd, Sunan al-Nasaʾī, Sunan Ibn Mājah

Musnad

In this book, all the narrations from one ṣahābī are bundled together in one chapter. The chapters can be sorted in various ways, for example alphabetically by a ṣahābīs name, by order of the ṣahābīs significance, or chronologically according to when the ṣahābī accepted Islam.

Example: Musnad li-Imām Aḥmad

Muʿjam

In this book, the author has compiled ḥādīth and arranged them under the names of the teachers they acquired the narrations from. The names of the teachers are then sorted by their death dates, their excellence in knowledge, or alphabetically.

Example: Muʿjam al-Kabīr by Imām al-Ṭabarānī

Juz

This book consists of narrations pertaining to a particular Islamic issue (masʿalah).

Example: Kitāb al-Rafʿ al-Yadayn fī al-Ṣalāh by Imām al-Bukhārī

Mufrad

This is a book in which the ḥādīth of one specific hadith scholar are all compiled.

Gharīb

This book consists of the narrations of a specific hadith scholar, which he narrated from one particular teacher.

Mustakhraj

In this book, the additional transmission chains missing from another book are compiled.

Example: Mustakhraj Abū ʿUwānah
Mustadrak

This book contains narrations that have apparently been left out of another compilation, even though they meet the criteria set out for that compilation.

Example: al-Mustadrak by Imām al-Ḥākim

The types of sourcebooks listed above were compiled by early scholars with their own transmission chains. Many later-day scholars have taken narrations from them to create compilations intended for the general Muslim public, such as Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn, Bulūgh al-Marām etc.