

CHAPTER 1

The Classical Tradition

Ghassan Abdul-Jabbar

Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj's (206–261/817–875) prologue to his hadith collection, the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, is the first treatise devoted to what later developed into the classical Islamic discipline of hadith evaluation or hadith criticism, known today as *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth* (“the technical terminology of hadith study”). This discipline grew out of the work of the hadith collectors themselves. Thus the summary of the discipline, the *Maʿrifat anwāʾ ʿulūm al-ḥadīth* of Ibn Ṣalāḥ (577–643/1181–1245), is a set of lectures in which each lecture describes one sort of expertise that those who engage with hadith must have. Since Ibn Ṣalāḥ's work, each scholarly work in this field has had to engage with what he wrote. This chapter describes this discipline of hadith evaluation.

Hadith experts begin by collecting hadiths and studying them to evaluate the accuracy of the texts being transmitted and the continuity of the chains of narration with which they are transmitted. Their primary concern is with establishing the texts of the hadith reports. By contrast, the practitioners of practical jurisprudence in Islam (the *fuqahāʾ*, or “the *fiqh* scholars”) begin with the practical implications of text – whether texts in the Qurʾān or hadith texts. They also evaluate hadiths, but they do this as an auxiliary to their interest in deriving “dos and don'ts” from these texts. Chapter 10 of this book deals with hadith in relation to Islamic law, and except for a brief note at the very end of this chapter, I have not discussed the perspective of the *fuqahāʾ* on hadith criticism.

This chapter deals with the Sunni approach to hadith evaluation, not the Shiʿi one, which will be discussed in Chapter 14. Nor am I concerned here with approaches to hadith adopted in many modern universities in Europe, Turkey, and the United States. These will be introduced in Chapter 2 and are also the focus of other chapters in this book.

Overview

By the middle of the second century of Islam, a distinct group of scholars were engaged in some disciplines that a scholar has to take into account when evaluating the soundness of hadiths. About a century later, these disciplines had branched off into a number of distinct genres: the study of cohorts of hadith narrators (*ṭabaqāt*, or *tarīkh*: “history”), narrator evaluation or criticism (*al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*: “positive and negative evaluation of narrators,” or *ilm al-rijāl*: “knowledge of narrators”), *ilal al-ḥadīth* (“the study of hidden defects of hadith”), and *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth* (“the terms hadith scholars use in their evaluation of hadith”), or *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* (“the principles of evaluating hadith”). This chapter is mainly about this last discipline.

The principles of hadith criticism emerged as a genre in the third century, but discussions of the discipline remained haphazard until Ibn Ṣalāḥ's *Ma'rifat anwā' ulūm al-ḥadīth*. This was a series of lectures in which he summarized the discussions of hadith criticism in a way that has defined the discipline to this day. Dhahabī (673–748/1274–1348) and Ibn Ḥajar (773–852/1372–1449) were able to put some finishing touches on the work of Ibn Ṣalāḥ so that, since their time, Muslim scholars see this discipline mainly in the perspective that these three scholars have provided.

In the first part of this chapter, presented in two sections, “Evaluating hadiths” and “Evaluating Hadiths from first principles,” I will simply review this perspective on hadith, which I will call the “post-Ibn Ḥajar perspective on hadith evaluation.” Most students of hadith begin with this perspective, and it remains the final word for all but a handful of contemporary hadith specialists.

In the second part of this chapter, again in two sections, “History” and “The Auxiliary Disciplines as Genres,” I have tried to work up to the perspective of these contemporary specialists by tracing the history of the development of the discipline until it found final form in the work of Dhahabī and Ibn Ḥajar. These contemporary specialists have attempted to recover the methods scholars of the second and third century used to evaluate hadiths. Ibn Ṣalāḥ, Dhahabī, and Ibn Ḥajar formulated rules and definitions to capture these methods, but these contemporary specialists argue that they had to compromise some nuance in the process. In the final part, “Recent Developments,” I point to these debates in a brief comment.

Evaluating Hadiths

A hadith is either totally rejected or found admissible for discussion. An admissible hadith is evaluated not as being true or false (a judgment confined to its text alone) but as being sound, tolerably sound, weak, or fabricated. This overall judgment on the “soundness” of a hadith is based first on assessing the “occurrence” (more accurately, the inability to rule out the non-occurrence) of the event of narration (that a narrator did hear that particular hadith from the source he names); and then on forming a judgment on the quality of the chain of narration, the narrators themselves, and the freedom of the text from strangeness and defect.

Degrees of Soundness

The hadith expert Muḥammad ibn Ismaʿīl al-Bukhārī (810–870/1194–1256), records the following two hadiths in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*:

Musaddad narrated to me, [he said that] Yahyā narrated to me from Hishām that he [Hishām] said: “My father narrated to me from ‘A’isha that Ḥamza ibn ‘Amr al-Aslamī said ‘O God’s Messenger, I fast continuously ...’ (Bukhārī 30 *ṣawm*, 33)

‘Abd Allāh ibn Yūsuf narrated to me, [he said that] Mālik reported to me from Hishām ibn ‘Urwa [who reported] from his father, [who reported] from ‘A’isha the wife of God’s Prophet [that she said,] “Ḥamza ibn ‘Amr al-Aslamī said to the Prophet: ‘Should I fast while traveling?’ [‘A’isha states:] He [Ḥamza] used to fast a lot. The Prophet replied ‘If you wish, you may fast, if you wish you may leave off fasting.’” (Bukhārī 30 *ṣawm*, 33)

A discipline of hadith evaluation ought to tell us whether the events reported in this hadith happened or not, and how accurately each hadith records the events, if they happened. Actually, though we have some hadith reports that are almost surely accurate and others that are almost surely inaccurate, the vast majority of reports are somewhere in between. Hadiths that tend toward being surely accurate are called “sound” (*ṣaḥīḥ*), while those at the other end are called “fabricated” (*mawḍūʿ*). The term “tolerably sound” (*ḥasan*) is used for the hadith that is a little less reliably reported, while the “weak” (*ḍaʿīf*) hadith is one that is not surely fabricated but is not reported reliably either.

Most often the hadith scholar’s judgment regarding the soundness of a hadith has to do with the text as narrated through a specific chain of narration. So when Abū Zurʿa criticized Muslim, the author of the second most reliable collection of sound hadiths, for including hadiths by narrators such as Asbāṭ ibn Naṣr, Quṭn ibn Nusayr, and Aḥmad ibn ʿĪsā – narrators not quite of the first rank of reliability – Muslim responded that he had done this where he knew the text itself through a perfectly sound chain of narration, but the weaker narrator is able to provide him a shorter chain of narration to the Prophet, so he narrated the hadith on his authority (Ḥāzimi 2007, 185, 188). The hadith texts in question are known to be well attested in their attribution to the Prophet, but Abū Zurʿa considers the hadiths weak because the well-attested texts are being narrated through chains of narration that include weak narrators.

Abū Zurʿa argues that a hadith is a series of claims. Each narrator claims he heard his source narrate the hadith. We evaluate the claim of each narrator with reference to his reliability. Since Asbāṭ ibn Naṣr, for example, is not of the very first rank of reliable narrators, his claim will not have the weight that the claim of a more reliable narrator would have. As a result, though the hadith texts that Muslim narrates through Asbāṭ ibn Naṣr are accurate reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet, the fact that Muslim narrates the texts through Asbāṭ ibn Naṣr will make the hadith evaluate as less than sound. Muslim’s excuse is that through other sources, he knows the Prophetic texts that he narrates through Asbāṭ ibn Naṣr to be accurate. A weak narrator’s report is not always inaccurate. Muslim assesses these to be cases where a narrator, although weak, was nevertheless conveying the Prophetic report accurately.

Past Judgments on Soundness of Hadiths

The companions and their followers noted down words and events they had participated in or had heard others tell them about (see Chapter 5). These notes were primarily an aid to memory. Succeeding generations would report these same hadiths through intermediaries. In transmission, some texts and chains of narration might have been shortened, lengthened, or corrupted. The idea of hadith collections where soundness of text and chain of narration was the principle of selection appeared and gained currency in these later generations.

By 225/840 Bukhārī had composed the first collection of hadith that made the reliability of hadiths an explicit criterion for selection. His student Muslim followed with a second such collection. Later, other hadith experts tried to compose such collections consisting exclusively of sound hadiths, but these two collections are the only ones that survived the test of time. In the next century Dāraquṭanī (306–385/918–995) devoted much of his life to trying to find weaknesses in the hadiths of Bukhārī and Muslim. Over the succeeding centuries, hadith experts studied these objections, and when Ibn Ḥajar came to summarize these discussions in *Fath al-bārī* scholars had found almost all of Dāraquṭanī's objections to be technical ones that did not touch the substance of their selection.

Mālik ibn Anas's *Muwaṭṭaʿ*, composed in the middle of the second century, is yet another work such that if a hadith is reported in it, it is judged to be sound. The book is from a different period, is written in a different style, and is available in a number of recensions containing a varying selection of 500–600 hadiths. All these things contribute to the fact that hadith scholars put the *Muwaṭṭaʿ* in a class separate from the well-known hadith works of the third century. Mālik's care in his selection of the hadith material he chooses has led to the unanimous decision of hadith experts that every hadith he narrates is sound.

So, one way that contemporary students of hadith identify a sound hadith is to consult the collections of Bukhārī or Muslim or to discover whether Mālik reports it in the *Muwaṭṭaʿ*. In such cases, we may consider the hadith sound, relying on the tested scholarship of these scholars. But the converse is not true. So, Abū Zurʿa, one of Muslim's teachers, objected that after Muslim's collection of sound hadiths, people will say that if a hadith is not in his work it is not sound. Muslim's response was to say that I have reported sound hadiths, but I do not claim to have recorded all hadiths that are sound (Ḥāzīmī 2007, 185–189).

The works of Bukhārī and Muslim are known as “the two sound collections.” Four more collections, those of Abū Dāwūd, Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, and Nasāʾī, are mentioned along with these two, and the six are called “the six sound collections” (for more detailed discussion, see Chapter 7). Those not familiar with the field make the mistake of thinking that a hadith in any of these six collections should be judged sound, though actually these four compilers did not take it upon themselves to collect only sound hadiths. However, since hadith experts have written extensive commentaries on each of these four collections, we can easily find informed scholarly judgments regarding any hadith they have reported.

Haythamī's (735–807/1335–1405) *Majmaʿ al-zawāʿid*, gathers together the hadith texts not reported in the Six Books but reported in some of the famous larger works:

namely, Ṭabarānī's three *Mu'jam* works, Abū Ya'la's *Musnad*, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad*, and Bazzār's *Musnad*. Most important for the student is that Haythamī has issued a judgment on the reliability of each hadith he records.

Another important source for judgments on hadiths not found in the Six Books is Ibn Ḥajar's *Fath al-bārī*. Although this is a commentary on Bukhārī's work, in his discussion of each hadith in Bukhārī, he brings in hadiths relevant to the topic from other works. Ibn Ḥajar has taken it upon himself only to mention hadiths that are at least tolerably sound ("ḥasan") in his discussions of the hadiths in Bukhārī's text.

Hadith specialists also produced compilations of weak and fabricated hadiths. Suyūṭī's *Al-La'ālī al-maṣnū'a*, Kinānī's *Tanzīh al-sharī'a al-marfū'a*, and Ibn Qayyim's *Al-Manār al-munīf* are excellent sources for hadiths that experts have deemed fabricated. Finally, Sakhāwī's *Al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana* is worth mentioning since he has tried to collect those texts that common people often cite as hadiths – some are sound hadiths, some are simply popular sayings, while some are fabricated reports falsely attributed to the Prophet.

Evaluating Hadiths from First Principles

One needs to re-do the work of the hadith experts from "first principles" for a hadith that previous scholars have not assessed or regarding which they have issued varied judgments. For example, Muslim records that Abū Ishāq al-Ṭāliqānī said,

I [Abū Ishāq] asked 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak about the hadith that says that it is a good thing to say prayers on behalf of your parents along with your own prayers, and to fast on their behalf along with your own fast. He ['Abdullāh] asked me who I had heard this from. I [Abū Ishāq] told him that this is a hadith that Shihāb ibn Khirāsh narrates. He ['Abd Allāh] said: "He's reliable. Who does he narrate it from?" I [Abū Ishāq] said, "Ḥajjāj ibn Dīnār." He ['Abd Allāh] said: "He's reliable. Who does he narrate from?" I [Abū Ishāq] said that he narrates it from the Prophet. 'Abd Allāh ibn Mubārak said: "O Abū Ishāq, there is a desert between Ḥajjāj ibn Dīnār and the Prophet long enough that many camels would die in it! But yes, there is no difference of opinion about doing good deeds on behalf of deceased relatives." (Muslim *Muqaddima*, 4)

In this report, Ḥajjāj is from the generation of people who had heard hadiths from the generation of people who had heard from the companions of the Prophet. So there are at least two unknown people (and perhaps more) whom Ḥajjāj has not mentioned and about whose truthfulness and accuracy we cannot say anything.

A report is false because one or more of the narrators has made a mistake: either inadvertently or intentionally. The more careful a narrator, the more we can trust that he has not made inadvertent errors. Similarly, we can expect a person who avoids lying in everyday life not to deliberately state a falsehood in narrating hadiths. But when the person reporting to us does not explicitly name all his sources we do not even know the names of all the narrators, so we are not in a position to evaluate their reliability. Thus, the chain of narration being complete and going all the way to the Prophet is essential. Finally, even reliable narrators make mistakes. So we need to have external checks to ensure that otherwise reliable narrators have not made any mistakes in a specific report.

Ibn Ṣalāḥ (577–643/1181–1245) presents, in the form of a definition, the practical activity of evaluating hadiths:

The sound hadith is the hadith that has a chain of narration that (1) goes all the way back to the Prophet (*musnad*), and that (2) is continuous (*muttaṣil*), and in which (3) a person of religious probity (*al-ʿadl*) who is (4) in control of the material he narrates (*al-ḍābiṭ*), relates the hadith on the authority of another person of religious probity who is in control of the material he narrates, until you reach the very end of the chain of narration; and (5) the hadith is neither unusual (*shādhḍh*) nor (6) does it contain any other hidden defect (*ʿilla*). (Ibn Ṣalāḥ 1986, 11–12)

The first two conditions of this definition have to do with the chain of narration, the second two with the narrators, and the final two with the text of the hadith.

The Chain of Narration: Continuity and Completeness

To establish that a hadith goes all the way back to the Prophet through a continuous chain of narration one begins by trying to establish that each narrator had actually heard the hadith from the source he is naming. At least he should have been of an age to possibly narrate a hadith from his source before the time his source died. In some cases we can find testimony of his having been present in a city at a time at which the source he names was narrating hadiths in that city.

Ibn Ḥajar's *Taqrīb al-tahdhīb* is the most accessible brief reference work we can use to investigate the continuity of the chain of narration. Ibn Ḥajar's work consists of brief entries on narrators mentioned by the authors of the Six Books in their various works. Using evidence of the kind mentioned above, for the purposes of this book, Ibn Ḥajar has devised 12 generational cohorts to identify the temporal position of a narrator. He places both Shihāb ibn Khirāsh and Ḥajjāj ibn Dīnār (from the quotation from Muslim above) in the seventh cohort: elder students of the students of the companions. So, the desert between Ḥajjāj and the Prophet is certainly a desert long enough that many camels would die in it!

Examining cohorts of narrators establishes the possibility that the chain of narration could be continuous. Mizzi's *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, the source for Ibn Ḥajar's *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, takes us a step further by providing a list of usual sources and transmitters for each narrator. Mizzi starts each entry with a list of everyone who has narrated from that narrator and everyone from whom that narrator has narrated. The appearance of a source–narrator and narrator–transmitter link in Mizzi's list strengthens faith in the continuity of these links in the chain. The fourth name in the list of Shihāb ibn Khirāsh's sources for hadiths is Ḥajjāj ibn Dīnār's. So, the chain of narration between Shihāb and Ḥajjāj is continuous while, clearly, it is broken between Ḥajjāj and the Prophet, making it a discontinuous and incomplete chain of narration.

Narrators: Reliability and Religiosity

The narrator should also be reliable in narrating hadiths and sound in his religious practice. Again, Ibn Ḥajar's *Taqrīb al-tahdhīb* is the most common reference work for

identifying these qualities in a narrator. The book is arranged alphabetically. The entry on Shihāb Ibn Khirāsh reads,

Shihāb son of Khirāsh son of Ḥawshab; of the Banū Shaybān tribe; father of Salṭ; of the city of Wāsiṭ; the son of ‘Awwām ibn Ḥawshab’s brother (Khirāsh). He settled in Kufa. He is mentioned in Muslim’s *Muqaddima*. Truthful, makes mistakes (*ṣadūq yukhṭi*)... (Ibn Ḥajar 1991, *sub* Shihāb ibn Khirāsh)

First, Ibn Ḥajar identifies Shihāb uniquely. He lists his father’s name, his grandfather’s, his tribal affiliation, and his geographic origin. People often use a patronymic to refer to a person, so he notes that he is the father of Salṭ. A chain of narration might refer to him as “Abū al-Salṭ.” He hails from Wāsiṭ in Iraq, so his name might be in chains of narration of people who are from Iraq or have traveled there and have narrated to Iraqis and from them.

Ibn Ḥajar’s *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, the more detailed work of which *Taqrīb* is a digest, tells us that Shihāb ibn Khirāsh has narrated only a few hadiths, but his uncle ‘Awwām, son of Ḥawshab, is better known and has narrated about 200 hadiths. Shihāb’s grandfather Ḥawshab accepted Islam at the hands of the fourth caliph, ‘Alī. ‘Alī gave him a slave girl whom Ḥawshab married, and these are the descendants from that marriage (Ibn Ḥajar 2005, *sub* Shihāb ibn Khirāsh).

The *Taqrīb* tells us that he settled in Kufa. So, we can expect to see Kufans or those who had visited Kufa to collect hadiths to be narrating from him. He is further identified as the Shihāb who has been mentioned in Muslim’s *Muqaddima*.

After this identification, Ibn Ḥajar judges his reliability: truthful, makes mistakes. This places Shihāb in the fifth of 12 grades of reliability that Ibn Ḥajar has proposed in the *Taqrīb* for assessing narrators (Table 1.1).

One could evaluate a chain of narration by looking up each narrator in Ibn Ḥajar’s *Taqrīb*. If it looks as if all the narrators have heard the hadith from their source, and each narrator is of the first three grades of positive evaluation, one could issue a tentative judgment that the hadith is “sound” (*ṣaḥīḥ*), provided that the remaining conditions are fulfilled. Where there is a narrator of the second three grades in the chain of narration, the hadith would come down to being “tolerably sound” (*ḥasan*). Where there is a narrator of the third three grades, we would judge the hadith to be weak (*ḍa‘īf*). Hadiths with a narrator of the tenth grade can be judged weak or, if evidence suggests it, they can be judged fabricated (*mawḍū‘*). Hadiths with a narrator from grade 11 or 12 would be judged to be fabricated. This judgment would be tentative, the final judgment resting on an examination of the remaining conditions.

The Text: Strangeness and Defects

Finally, for a hadith to be sound, the text must not be unusual, nor should it contain a hidden defect. A text is deemed unusual when either what it reports or the chain of narration through which the report comes to us, stands out as unusual with respect to the whole corpus of hadith as it has reached us.

Table 1.1 Ibn Ḥajar's 12 grades of reliability of narrators.

Grade	Description of narrators	Words used
1	The companions	
2	Narrators evaluated by repeating the highest words of positive assessment: "reliable, reliable" or "reliable, strong"	<i>"thiqa, thiqa,"</i> or <i>"thiqa, thabt"</i>
3	Narrators evaluated by <i>one</i> of these highest words of positive evaluation	<i>thiqa, thabt</i>
4	Narrators evaluated by a lukewarm word of positive evaluation: "truthful"	<i>ṣadūq</i>
5	Narrators evaluated by a lukewarm word of praise qualified by a slightly critical word, such as "truthful, but makes mistakes"	<i>"ṣadūq yukhṭi"</i>
6	Narrators whose hadiths are few but about whom no one has found anything sufficiently damaging to reject their hadiths; indicated by the words "acceptable when others corroborate his report, otherwise, weak"	
7	Narrators from whom more than one hadith expert has related hadiths but no one has stated to be reliable	<i>mastūr, or majhūl al-hāl</i>
8	Narrators whom nobody has assessed as reliable while some experts have applied the description as "weak"	<i>weak – ḍa'īf</i>
9	Narrators from whom only one person has reported hadiths and whom no one has assessed as reliable	<i>majhūl</i>
10	Narrators whom no one has evaluated as reliable while they have received significant critical commentary	<i>matrūk, matrūk al-hadith, wāhi al-hadith, or sāqiṭ</i>
11	Narrators accused of lying	
12	Narrators who are liars or fabricators of hadith	

A hadith of Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh ibn Jabal tells us that in his journey to Tabūk the Prophet would pray the afternoon salat and the late afternoon salat at one time, and he would pray the sunset salat and the evening salat at one time. Notice that this hadith does not specify whether he would delay the first salat so that he would pray both salats at the time of the second salat, or he would pray the second salat in advance, praying both salats in the time of the first one. Numerous hadiths explicitly describe the Prophet as delaying the first salat in travel, but hadith scholars have been hard put to find a sound hadith that describes the Prophet as having prayed the second salat in advance, in the time for the first salat.

In this commonly narrated version (that does not specify the time of the salat), Abū al-Zubayr narrates the hadith from Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh, and a number of reliable narrators relate this text from Abū al-Zubayr in this manner. One weak narrator, Hishām ibn Sa'd, also narrates the hadith from this same chain of narration of Abū al-Zubayr, from Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh, but he narrates the text differently. This weak version of this hadith specifies that when the Prophet would start travel before the time for the afternoon salat, he would continue traveling until the time for the late afternoon salat, then he would get down from his mount and everyone would pray both salats in the time for the second salat. If the time for the afternoon salat had begun before the Prophet started traveling, he would pray both salats in the time for the first salat and then begin his journey. In this same manner, if he traveled before the sun had set, he would travel until the time for the evening salat had started, and then he would get down from his mount and would pray both salats together in the time of the second salat. If the sun had set

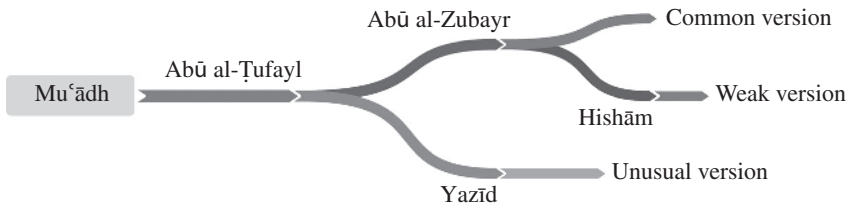


Figure 1.1 Unusual text: versions of Hishām's hadith on combining prayers.

before the Prophet started traveling, he would pray both salats in the time of the first, sunset, salat, and then he would begin his journey.

This is the well-known narration of the hadith and the weak version of the text of that well-known hadith as Hishām ibn Sa'd has narrated it (Figure 1.1). Another, unusual narration of the hadith is the one that Yazīd ibn Abī Ḥabīb narrates from Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh. A very reliable narrator, Qutayba ibn Sa'id, claims that Layth ibn Sa'd narrated this hadith to him from Yazīd ibn Abī Ḥabīb with a text like the text of Hishām ibn Sa'd's hadith: a text that does not just state that the Prophet would pray salats ordained for two different times together while traveling but, rather, specifies that he would pray the two salats in the time of the second salat if he started out before the time of the first salat, and would pray them in the time of the first salat if he started out after.

In Ibn Ḥajar's classification in the *Taqrīb*, Hishām ibn Sa'd is a narrator of the fifth grade: "truthful but he has misconceptions" (*ṣadīq lahu awhām*), opposing Sufyān Thawrī, Zuhayr ibn Mu'āwiya, and Qurra ibn Khālīd, each of whom is a narrator of the second grade. In addition, Hishām is trying to establish an important, unusual practice: offering an obligatory prayer before the time of it having become obligatory. So, hadith experts easily dismiss his hadith as an error.

Qutayba's hadith is a problem. All the factors that go against Hishām's hadith go against Qutayba's, but all the narrators of this unusual narration are of second grade, of the highest grade of reliability in the *Taqrīb* classification. Two particular pieces of information suggest that we should not take it at face value: (i) This hadith is the only instance of the chain of narration Yazīd ibn Ḥabīb from Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh; (ii) Layth narrates this hadith from Yazīd ibn Ḥabīb from Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh, and he is also among the people who narrate the common but weak version of this hadith from Hishām from Abū al-Zubayr from Abū al-Ṭufayl. If Layth were able to narrate this hadith from Abū al-Ṭufayl with only Yazīd as intermediary, why would he take the longer route of narrating it from Hishām from Abū al-Zubayr from Abū al-Ṭufayl (Figure 1.2)?

Hadith experts have struggled with this report in various ways. Ibn Abī Ḥātim has suggested that Qutayba has made two mistakes in this hadith. Qutayba is known as one of the narrators of Hishām's weak version of this hadith. He intended to narrate Hishām's hadith, with its unusual text, but instead of naming Hishām in the chain of narration, his mind wandered and he named Layth. Layth frequently narrates hadiths from Yazīd. So Qutayba was narrating the text he had heard from Hishām from Abū al-Zubayr but he mistakenly attributed it to Layth from Yazīd. Then Qutayba returned to the actual chain of narration of the hadith he had intended to narrate, so he finished up

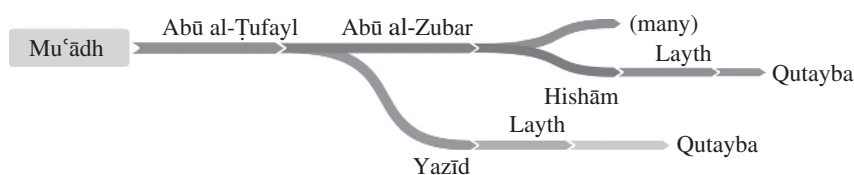


Figure 1.2 Unusual narration: Qutayba's hadith on combining prayers.

with Abū al-Ṭufayl from Mu'adh. Thus the unusual hadith text that should have been narrated through Qutayba from Layth from Hishām from Abū al-Zubayr from Abū Ṭufayl from Mu'adh ended up being narrated through Qutayba from Layth from Yazīd from Abū Ṭufayl from Mu'adh (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 2006, 2:104 no. 245; Mizzī 1980–1992, *sub* Qutayba ibn Sa'īd).

As another example, Ibn Abī Ḥātim says that he had heard Muḥammad ibn Muṭarrif narrate a hadith from Zayd ibn Aslam from 'Aṭā from the companion 'Ubāda ibn Ṣāmit. Muḥammad ibn Muṭarrif was a reliable narrator but Ibn Abī Ḥātim felt uneasy about this hadith. Then much later, when he heard the hadith narrated from Hishām from Zayd ibn Aslam *from Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥibbān from Ibn Muḥayrīz from 'Aṭā from 'Ubāda*, he understood what had happened. Zayd ibn Aslam does narrate hadiths directly from 'Aṭā, but Zayd had this specific hadith through two intermediaries from 'Aṭā. When Muḥammad ibn Muṭarrif narrated it as if Zayd ibn Aslam had heard it directly from 'Aṭā, Ibn Abī Ḥātim was put in doubt. When he heard the hadith through Hisham, his knowledge of both narrators, of the various narrations of this hadith, of the types of mistakes narrators can and do make, and of probably half a dozen other such things, convinced him that in this case, Muḥammad ibn Muṭarrif had erred and dropped two names, that of Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥibbān and that of Ibn Muḥayrīz, from the chain of narration (Ibn Abī Ḥātim 2006, 2:95 no. 239).

In another such incident, Abū 'Awāna, a very reliable narrator, narrated a hadith in front of 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī. Ibn Mahdī told him that he was mistaken, and that he, Abū 'Awāna, had not himself heard the hadith from the source he claimed he had heard it from. Abū 'Awāna was alarmed at this accusation, but when he checked his original notebooks, Abū 'Awāna could not find this hadith in the corpus of texts he had narrated. Abū 'Awāna asked Ibn Mahdī how this could have happened. Ibn Mahdī suggested that he had heard the hadith as a young man in an informal discussion of someone else's hadiths, and the hadith had stuck in his head and he had ended up repeating it as if it was his own hadith (Ibn Ḥibbān 2000, 1:51).

Ibn Mahdī's judgment is not based on a simple knowledge of dates and of who had met whom. Rather, a number of incidents told about him suggest that he had a reputation of having a comprehensive knowledge of the sources of hadiths and of the people who had acquired these hadiths from these sources.

This kind of judgment depends entirely on depth of study, and it is precisely this depth of study that hadith experts of this period do claim for him. 'Ali ibn al-Madīnī, relates that when he came to Kufa he began careful study of the hadiths of A'mash. Going through the hadiths of various students of A'mash he was able to gather together a

considerable collection of A‘mash’s hadiths. When he came to Basra, he mentioned his interest in A‘mash’s hadiths to ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Mahdī. Ibn Mahdī said to him, “Let me dictate thirty of A‘mash’s hadiths to you that you would not have.” He not only knew A‘mash’s hadiths, but his knowledge of the sources of A‘mash’s hadith was complete enough to allow him to guess which of them Ibn al-Madinī would not have been able to locate (Rāmāhurmuzī 1971, 251).

An expert will identify a hadith as unusual, and hence not meeting the fifth condition of the sound hadith, through his close familiarity with numerous narrations of many hadiths of many narrators. Such familiarity is also the only way to identify errors in hadiths that are sound with respect to the other five conditions. The first five conditions cover obvious defects, leaving this sixth one to cover “hidden defects,” errors that are apparent only to experts.

Evaluating Hadiths from First Principles: Summary

In summary, although the text of a reported incident is either true or false, a report about the Prophet will be judged on a sliding scale. Some will be judged definitely sound. Others can be safely discarded as obvious mistakes or fabrications. But most will be more or less sound.

This is because most criteria are a matter of judgment. Usually, narrators are more or less reliable in their narration of hadiths and their religious practice is more or less sound. It is true that the chain of narration is either connected or broken, but the evidence that each person has actually heard each hadith from his source can have varying degrees of strength. Similarly, the claim that the hadith actually goes back to the Prophet can be well supported or less well supported. The final two conditions, that a hadith not be “unusual,” and that there be no hidden defects in it are the two conditions most subject to the expert’s judgment.

Finally, except in some extreme cases of a hadith being totally rejected as an obvious mistake or a fabrication, the judgment of a hadith being sound, reasonably sound, weak, or fabricated depends on weighing all six conditions: (i) continuity and (ii) completeness of the chain of narration; (iii) reliability in narration and (iv) soundness of religious practice; and absence of (v) strangeness and (vi) hidden defects in the text of the hadith. Thus, if the narrator of a hadith is very reliable, a fairly unusual hadith will be acceptable on his authority. An unusual hadith coming from a less reliable narrator will be rejected more readily.

History

It took about a century after the demise of the Prophet for hadith to develop into the genre as we know it today. At roughly the same time, an auxiliary “literature” (oral and written) related to examining these texts emerged. After the middle of the third/ninth century, this literature was to separate into four interrelated, distinct bodies of material: *ta’rīkh* or *ṭabaqāt* (history or the study of cohorts of hadith narrators), *‘ilal* (the study of

hidden defects in hadith), *rijāl* or *jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl* (knowledge of narrators or narrator criticism), and *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth* or *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* (the terms hadith scholars use in evaluating hadiths or the principles of hadith criticism).

The Genesis of Hadith as a Genre

People were writing down words of the Prophet from his very lifetime (A'zami 1978, 34ff.), but while the Prophet was alive authority was vested in the person of the Prophet and not in any oral or written record of his sayings or deeds. Such records would gain authority as the temporal distance from the person of the Prophet grew, and as the community united in the tutelage of the Prophet was confronted with disputes.

The Prophet did not describe in lectures the ideal life that a Muslim should live. He lived that life and people tried to emulate him. This ideal conduct was known as the sunna, the “way,” of the Prophet in doing anything. In the first instance, those learning the Prophetic sunna learned it directly from being in his company. The Prophet might use words to describe what he wanted emulated, to correct errors in emulation, but the primary vehicle for his teaching was his example. Words did not serve as an independent vehicle for transferring his exemplary life to his audience.

Islamic scholarship continues to value learning from a teacher whose practice preserves what he teaches, but today texts are the primary vehicle of instruction. In a gathering of people who had spent years in the company of the Prophet, written or oral narratives of the Prophet's deeds and words would not have the significance they would later gain when those texts became the only source of access to that lived life.

As the first century progressed, the text began to weigh more and more compared to companionship as the primary vehicle of instruction. Thus, for example, most of a group of scholars in Medina, known as the “seven scholars,” died within five years or so of 100 AH (718 CE). Each of these scholars had spent large portions of their lives as disciples of younger companions and each was known as a repository of the knowledge of the companion he had lived with.

This shift in medium of instruction from companionship to texts and verifiably sound texts is reflected in Ibn Sirīn's (33–110/653–733) statement that people used not to ask for sources, but when “The Dispute” occurred, people started asking those who would quote the Prophet's words to name their informants (Muslim *Muqaddima*, 5). Where there had been a single, unimpeachable source of knowledge, Ibn Sirīn's statement speaks of an awareness of variety in the sources of knowledge. Another oft-quoted report in this respect is that 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, caliph from 99 to 101 AH (717–719 CE), wrote to his governors to look in their areas for whatever sunnas they could find and write them down since he was afraid that knowledge might die out with the deaths of the scholars.

Those who had learned directly as disciples of the Prophet would not be impressed by narratives that went against things they had learned directly: they could simply deny them, or they could seek a suitable interpretation. Those who learned from the companions, not having the comfort of confidence in direct learning from the Prophet, would be much more disturbed by such conflicting narratives. This is not a matter of a

development from oral reports to written ones. Rather, the significance of narration about the Prophet changed during the course of the first century.

Dispute and temporal distance from the Prophet forced those who were concerned to look for new ways of preserving the exemplary life of the Prophet. Throughout the second century, the concern to gather together such reports and to separate reliable reports about the Prophet from weak ones led to the genesis of the group of scholars that came to be known as “hadith folk.”

Pericopae about the Prophet were neither the invention of the hadith folk nor their sole preserve: scholars of Islamic law, people concerned with preserving the inner aspect of the Prophet’s teaching, even poets and authors of belles lettres would quote sentences of the Qur’an and reports of the Prophet’s words and deeds in their works. But not everyone was equal in preserving such *pericopae* with accuracy. Then, a narrator would convey a report to, say a dozen of his pupils, who might convey it to another dozen – thus a single report in one generation would become 144 in the students of their students, each of them varying in their ability to preserve these reports with accuracy. Identifying the most accurate of these 144 versions of a report became a complex art to which the hadith folk devoted themselves.

Some would argue that these *pericopae* should be used in conjunction with other things like a broad understanding of the sunna of the Prophet, while others would argue that they could actually become a substitute for the knowledge that previous generations had gained in discipleship. In this chapter I must bypass these important issues to return to focus on the discipline the hadith folk developed to identify the accuracy of these reports. I have raised these issues to suggest the gradual process by which hadith itself, the disciplines of evaluating the accuracy of hadith reports, and the principles involved in such evaluation grew into distinct genres and became the province of expertise of a dedicated class of scholars.

The Closing of the Corpus and the Beginnings of Auxiliary Disciplines

One can imagine an early period, say during the very life of the Prophet, when someone could report that the Prophet had said something and, depending on what the person was reporting and how reliable that person was, it would be acceptable even if no one else could corroborate his report. At the other end of the spectrum we can imagine a time in which if a person were to report something that the Prophet had said, the fact that no one else was reporting anything like it would be considered clear evidence that that report was wrong, no matter how reliable the person.

When the period ended in which hadith scholars remained willing to entertain the possibility of a single person reporting a hadith that no one else in his cohort reports, we can say that the corpus of hadiths was closed and no further additions to it were acceptable. Versions of these same texts narrated through numerous chains could multiply, but the number of texts being transmitted would remain the same.

In describing the classes of reliable narrators, Dhahabī tried to identify this period. Accepting a report coming through a single early source depends on the reliability of the narrator, the nature of the report, and the cohort of the narrator. So he says that the

report of a single narrator narrating a hadith from a companion will be acceptable from a narrator who stands at the summit of reliability, such as Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib (21–94/642–712). When a narrator of this quality in the next generation, such as Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri (50–124/671–741), is alone in reporting a hadith from just one of the followers of the companions, the hadith may be considered sound. It is rare to find instances of this in the next generation. So a narrator of the very first quality in this next generation, such as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī (135–198/752–814) or Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Qaṭṭān (120–198/738–814), will relate 200,000 versions of hadiths, with only two or three hadiths that he narrates them although no one else in his cohort is able to (Dhahabī 1405b, 77).

Hadith experts have estimated the total number of distinguishable texts of hadith as being around 10,000. We must take Dhahabī to mean that narrators of the very first quality would command a corpus of many hundred thousand different chains of narrations to the set of hadith texts they knew. Of these many hundred thousand paths to these texts, they would not be able to come up with more than a handful of paths that others did not have.

A comprehensive count of hadith narrations and texts is difficult because the many narrations of a hadith text differ from each other in such a continuum that it is often difficult to decide how many unique texts one should make out of hundreds of variant versions of hadiths that seem alike. Also, one would like to limit the count to reliable reports, but there are often differences of opinion on the criteria for a hadith to be considered reliable and on the application of these criteria to a specific hadith. Nevertheless, hadith scholars have often tried to construct a broad vision of the field. One can contest the details of such a vision while benefiting from it in trying to construct a history of the development of the field.

ʿAlī ibn al-Madīnī (161–234/778–849), an outstanding hadith expert of the late second/early third century, is known as “the philosopher among the hadith scholars.” He has tried to capture the development of the literature in his reflections on hadith narrations in his *Kitāb al-ʿilal* (al-Madīnī n.d.). He identifies six people who died toward the end of the first quarter of the first century as the pivot of chains of narration in each locality: Zuhri (50–124/671–741) in Mecca, ʿAmr ibn Dīnār (d. 126/743) in Medina, Qatāda (60–117/679–735) and Yaḥyā ibn abī Kathīr (d. 129/746) in Basra, and Aʿmash (61–148/680–765) and Abū Ishāq al-Sabʿī (33–127/653–744) in Kufa.

Ibn al-Madīnī’s study of chains of narrations showed him that if a hadith was being narrated in Mecca, for example, Zuhri would probably be among those narrating it. Zuhri is of the generation who would have had met many disciples of the younger companions, and who would have felt the impulse that led ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-Azīz (61–101/681–720) to ask that people write down the sunnas they were able to find in their areas. I suggest that Ibn al-Madīnī was able to identify pivots in chains of narration because in every locality in the Islamic world in this period in the early second century there were well-known scholars who had felt the need to collect the information about the sunna from disciples of the younger companions, and the outstanding ones among them had gathered together just about all the hadiths that were available in their area.

Ibn al-Madinī calls the generation after this the generation of the authors of the topical collections of hadiths. This is the generation of Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179), the author of the *Muwaṭṭaʿ*. The variant versions of hadiths continued to grow geometrically in the succeeding two generations so that by the end of the century there were collections with many tens of thousands of hadiths. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's (164–241) *Musnad* contains about 28,000 hadiths. ʿAbd al-Razzāq's (126–211) *Muṣannaf* and Ibn Abī Shayba's (159–235) *Muṣannaf* contain about 20,000 and 38,000 reports respectively, though in the common style of second-century hadith works they contain both Prophetic hadiths and reports about later authorities.

Students of the history of narrator criticism usually begin with incidents from the life of the Prophet and from the period of the Caliphs, where someone confronted with a report about the Prophet demands to know the reporter, or where he rejects the report because the person conveying it was not reliable. Such events can certainly be presented as justification for the activity of narrator criticism. Such justification is required since, in general, speaking ill of people is blameworthy.

But the beginning of narrator criticism as a discipline must be tied to the beginning of the genre of hadith, with the formal appearance of a chain of narration followed by narrated text. As a corpus of such texts establishes itself as a genre, it demands an accompanying corpus identifying and evaluating the names appearing in the chains of narration of these texts.

Thus, Dhahabī begins his list of scholars whose critical assessment of narrators count with the usual early instances of critical assessments of narrators, but he ends this discussion of the precursors of the narrator critics and introduces his list of actual narrator critics with the words, "Then, when most of the followers of the companions had died, around the year 150/767, a group of brilliant scholars began to assess narrators positively and negatively." After listing four examples he states, "Let us now begin naming those scholars who, when they assess a narrator, their assessment is accepted..." (Dhahabī 1405a, 175).

This first generation of critics is the same as the generation of the authors of the topical collections. They assessed the work of the preceding generation, the one that forms the pivot of hadith transmission. Narrator evaluation came into its own in these same three generations in which the corpus of hadith grew geometrically. These generations span the period from the second part of the second/eighth century to the first part of the third/ninth: starting from this generation of Mālik (93–179/711–795), Sufyān al-Thawrī (97–161/716–778), and Shuʿba (82–160/701–777), continuing with the generation of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī (135–198/752–814) and Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Qaṭṭān (120–198/738–814), and reaching a summit in ʿAlī ibn al-Madinī's (161–234/778–849) own generation that includes Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164–241/780–855) and Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn (158–233).

A series of books record sessions in which a student reports question after question he asked of a scholar of this period along with the scholar's response. For example, we have the *Suʾālāt* ("questions") that Ibn al-Junayd asked Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn, those that Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān ibn abī Shayba asked ʿAlī ibn al-Madinī, those that Abū Dāwūd asked Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. Part of this genre are also the books of *ʿIlal* (for example, by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, by ʿAlī ibn al-Madinī, and by Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn) and of

Tarīkh (for example, that of Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn) by hadith experts of this period. The substance of Ibn Ḥajar's *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb* is the evaluations of hadiths and narrators from these and other scholars of this period.

One source for narrator evaluation was anecdotal information: a hadith expert says that he caught a narrator lying, or that he heard him narrate a certain hadith in one way and then, later, heard him narrating it differently. However, with the proliferation of the versions of a hadith as a teacher passed it on to his dozens of students and they passed it on to their dozens of students, hadith critics found a potent new tool with which to assess narrators. Narrator criticism based on a close study of all the chains of narrations and all the texts that a narrator relates allowed the critic to move beyond the anecdotal method.

So, when Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn came to ʿAffān to hear the hadiths of Ḥammād ibn Salama having already heard Ḥammād's hadith from 17 other students of Ḥammād, Ibn Maʿīn was in a position to judge ʿAffān's narration. ʿAffān refused to narrate these hadiths to Ibn Maʿīn! Ibn Maʿīn was coming less to learn from him and more to judge him (Ibn Ḥibbān, *Majrūḥīn*, 34).

The Auxiliary Disciplines as Genres

Much of the narrator assessment of scholars of these three generations was derived from this kind of comparative study of multiple narrations of a text. Such studies would expose the general character of strength and weakness in the narrations of a narrator, and they would also reveal errors in the narration of an otherwise strong narrator. This latter would be dubbed the study of hidden defects in hadith and would merit entire books devoted to it. In addition, while assessing narrators and hadiths, comments that the critic had made incidentally would later be identified as principles of hadith criticism. Later scholars would scour the comments of the scholars of these three generations for incidental records of hidden defects and of principles of hadith criticism, and these comments would become a point of reference for all later study.

The Narration of Texts

By organizing hadiths according to their bearing on various topics of religious practice, the topical collections presented an implicit demand that hadiths be taken into account in any discussion of a religious issue. But by the end of the second century the field had become so complex that this demand was no longer practical. A series of works appeared in the third century that, as a whole, presented a brief selection that could serve as a guide to the hadiths relevant to any topic of discussion and served to rehabilitate this demand.

In the second and third quarters of the third century, Bukhārī (194–256/810–870) and his student Muslim (206–261/817–875) had written their brief works recording only the soundest of sound hadiths, and only hadiths that went all the way back to the Prophet (i.e. not sayings or judgments of the companions and later scholars). Ibn

Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) also composed a collection that, in his judgment, contained only sound hadiths, but later scholars identified numerous questionable hadith in his collection. Ḥākim (321–405/933–1014) tried to identify sound hadiths that Bukhārī and Muslim had missed in their collections, but, again, later scholars identified numerous weak and even fabricated hadiths in his work.

The more generally beneficial direction of effort turned out to be in the works of Abū Dāwūd, Tirmidhī, Nasāʾī, and Ibn Māja, who relaxed the criteria of soundness to include hadiths that scholars of practical jurisprudence actually used as evidence in their arguments. Nasāʾī's work added a dimension of technical hadith criticism by identifying mistakes of narrators by comparing different narrations of a single text. Ibn Māja's work was distinguished by including many narrations that were not present in all the other five works. At the same time, he ended up including a number of hadiths that hadith experts deemed to be clear mistakes and even fabrications. So three centuries later, when the value of these books came to be acknowledged among hadith scholars, some spoke of the five books, subtracting Ibn Māja's work, while others substituted Dārimī's (181–255/869–797) *Sunan* for Ibn Māja's to complete the six.

In the first century and through most of the second century the unit of transmission was the single hadith. Sessions of hadith narration were not usually tied to books: students would come to get the authority to transmit hadiths from hadith narrators, and either the narrator would decide the hadiths to be read out, or the students would request particular hadiths or sets of hadith. The hadith narrator would usually be in possession of manuscripts from which he would read out these hadiths, but these manuscripts were primarily for his own use. The third century was the century for hadith compilations. A contemporary scholar has argued that this was the century in which just about all reliably transmitted hadiths were collected and compiled into works of hadith written for the benefit of the public (al-ʿAwnī 1996, 61). So, in the fourth century, the written book replaced the pericope as the unit of transmission.

Hadith scholars continued to compose collections of hadiths throughout the fourth and even the fifth century. However, it is rare to find a hadith in these compilations that was sound and had not already been recorded in the compilations of the third century. Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Maghribī's *Jamʿ al-fawāʾid* gathers together the texts of hadiths discounting repeated texts from most of the major well-known collections of hadiths. The total number of hadiths in this book is 10,133. Thus, it is quite reasonable to think that by the end of the third century the corpus of hadith texts might have been recorded in hadith compilations.

Narrator Evaluation

Bukhārī's *Al-Taʾrīkh al-kabīr*, appearing around the end of the first quarter of the second century, was the first work organizing the narrators of hadith in roughly alphabetical order, and then according to generational cohort within each alphabet. This work gave shape to what was to become the field of narrator criticism.

Bukhārī focused on narrators, but though there was some material on narrator criticism in many entries, the work was more concerned with identifying narrators,

studying hidden defects of hadiths, and incidentally discussing principles of hadith criticism. As narrator criticism was to develop, issuing judgment on narrators was to be seen as the final goal of the discipline. Bukhārī's work was lacking in this respect. In addition, Bukhārī loved subtlety, so that even when he issued judgment he did it in a way that only someone with considerable background in hadith studies can understand what he has said.

The next work in the field was Ibn Abī Ḥātim's (195–277/811–890) work, *Al-Jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*. There is a story that when Abū Ḥātim and Abū Zur'a saw Bukhārī's work they felt that they could not get along without it so they sat Abū Ḥātim's son down with Bukhārī's *Ta'rikh* and had him go through the entries one by one asking them what they had to say regarding each entry. They replied with what they had learned from Bukhārī and added a comment or two here and there and this compilation of Abū Ḥātim's son was what came to be known as *Al-Jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*! (Khaṭīb Baghdādī 1987, 1:15–16).

However, comparing the entries in the two books, it is clear that Ibn Abī Ḥātim's is entirely a different kind of work. Ibn Abī Ḥātim is concerned to issue judgment on the reliability of each narrator. Discarding all of Bukhārī's allusions to hidden defects and the principles of criticism, he makes his book one of the first books in the genre of narrator criticism proper.

ʿIjlī's (182–261/798–874) *al-Thiqāt* is another book from this period. By the end of the fourth century, al-ʿUqaylī's (d. 322/934) *al-Ḍuʿufā*, Ibn ʿAdī's (277–365/890–975) *al-Kāmil fī ḍuʿufā al-rijāl*, and Ibn Ḥibbān's (d. 354/965) *Kitāb al-majrūhīn* comprised an encyclopedic compendium describing most narrators of hadith who had been considered weak by critics. Ibn Ḥibbān also wrote *al-Thiqāt*, which focused only on sound narrators. These works summarize and study the efforts of the critics of the second and third centuries so they carry that same flavor. There is some anecdotal evaluation, but much of the evaluation is based on a study of the narrations of hadith: the study of hidden defects.

Criticism of this period, especially of the first few generations of critics, also reflects the gradual growth of terminology. A narrator can be strong relative to one narrator and weak relative to another. A critic can describe a narrator as strong, very strong, tolerably strong, or not quite weak. So the comments of a single critic about a single narrator must be understood in the light of what others have said about him. Dhahabī states that some critics are quick to issue harsh criticism and do not praise a narrator easily, others are quick to praise and slow to criticize, while a third group is known as even-handed (Dhahabī 1405a, 171–172).

Each critic may use words differently, and in some instances, a single critic may use a single term to indicate two different evaluations. So there are instances where Yahyā ibn Maʿīn denigrates a narrator saying, "He's nothing." But in some instances he uses this same term to indicate that this narrator has so few hadiths that he is not worth wasting one's breath over (Ibn Ḥajar 2003 1:421).

In the late fourth and fifth centuries, scholars began composing works collecting the assessments relevant to the narrators of the hadiths present in a single work, such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī or that of Muslim. This work led to the composition of the source of the common compendia of biographies of hadith narrators, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī's (541–600/1146–1203) *Al-Kamāl fī asmā al-rijāl*. Maqdisī wrote biographical

entries on the narrators mentioned in the chains of narrations of the hadiths in the Six Books. In *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, Mizzī (654–742/1256–1341) expanded on his effort, correcting mistakes, adding narrators that Maqdisī had missed, adding much biographical data on various narrators, adding entries on narrators mentioned in other hadith works composed by the authors of the Six Books, and adding entries on narrators who do not narrate in the Six Books but have names similar to narrators of hadiths in the Six Books and who could be confused with them. With these additions, his book became about three times the size of Maqdisī's *al-Kamāl*.

Mizzī's *Tahdhīb al-kamāl* turned out to be an invaluable resource for students of hadith but it was voluminous. Mizzī's student, Dhahabī, tried to bring his book down to a manageable size by deleting all the biographical material that was not relevant to identifying the narrator and to assessing his reliability in transmitting hadiths. At the same time he added some useful material from 'Alā al-Dīn al-Mughaltā'ī's *Ikmāl tahdhīb al-kamāl* and from his own study. The result of this work, *Tadhhīb al-tahdhīb*, was, once again, of a size comparable to Mizzī's work, so Dhahabī wrote a very brief digest of it in a single volume: *al-Kāshif*. This work mentions just the name of the narrator followed by a few lines to help the student identify the narrator, place him in history, and evaluate his reliability as a narrator. Dhahabī was a pedagogue, and his brief comments in these entries constitute a marvelous introduction to numerous narrators.

In the following century, Ibn Ḥajar brought the size of the *Tadhhīb* down by a third by focusing strictly on material related to narrator evaluation. Because of this focus and the reduced size, today his book, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, is the most popular single first source for biographies of narrators whose narrations are in the Six Books. Ibn Ḥajar improved on Dhahabī's *al-Kāshif* in his *Taqrīb al-tahdhīb*, by his very systematic scheme of evaluating narrators. So today there is no better source than his *Taqrīb al-tahdhīb* for a quick evaluation of the reliability of a narrator.

Principles of Criticism

By the end of the second century, Shāfi'ī (150–204/767–820) had written his *Risāla*. The subject of the treatise is the proper way to understand the Qur'an, but as a part of this discussion he states principles one must observe in assessing hadiths to be used to decide religious issues. While establishing the importance of reference to Prophetic practice in all religious issues, he decisively rejects all non-textual attempts to recover that practice. He argues that the text, well documented and reported through a continuous and complete chain of narration through reliable people, should be the only source for establishing anything about practice. In technical terms, Shāfi'ī rejects hadiths with discontinuous chains of narration and hadiths that do not go all the way back to the Prophet. Basing all practice on sound hadiths, he presents a definition of the sound hadith. These discussions remain the foundations of discussions of hadith criticism to this day.

Nevertheless, Shāfi'ī treats these topics incidentally, as his main topic requires. The first independent, focused discussion of the principles one must observe in evaluating hadiths available to us today is in Muslim's prolegomena (*Muqaddima*) to his *Saḥīḥ*. Another such discussion, covering many more topics than Muslim's, is Tirmidhi's in his

Kitab al-ʿilal, usually included as an addendum to his *Sunan*. Abū Dāwūd also discusses a handful of important issues in hadith criticism in his letter describing his compilation of hadiths, the *Sunan*, to the people of Mecca.

These discussions are not incidental but they are fragmentary. The authors of the Six Books and other hadith experts of the third century demonstrate the principles of hadith criticism much more in practice than in trying to capture their practice by verbal formulations and definitions. It is with Rāmahurmuzī's (265–360/879–970) *al-Muḥaddith al-fāsil* that we can say we finally have a first work on hadith criticism. Many of the topics that will become familiar in later texts on hadith criticism appear in this work. But Rāmahurmuzī does not describe the way to judge a hadith to be sound, reasonably sound, or weak. Ḥākim (321–405/933–1014) fulfilled this crucial lack in *Maʿrifat ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*, the second sustained work on hadith criticism.

In *al-Kifāya fī ʿulūm al-riwāya* and in a series of treatises he wrote on the various skills a hadith expert must have, Khaṭīb Baghdādī (392–463/1002–1071) brought together the discussions that were scattered through the works of the experts from the second century to the fifth. Khaṭīb's works form the basis for the first comprehensive manual for hadith criticism, Ibn Ṣalāḥ's *Maʿrifat anwaʿ ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*.

Ibn Ṣalāḥ's manual was a series of his lectures that soon gained the position of a single textbook that students would consider a sufficient introduction to the discipline of hadith criticism. For the next few centuries, works on principles of hadith criticism would be verifications of Ibn Ṣalāḥ's work, summaries of it, or glosses and commentaries upon it.

After his work, perhaps the only work that gained comparable importance was Ibn Ḥajar's *Nukhbat al-fikar*, along with his own commentary on it, *Nuzhat al-naẓar*. While Ibn Ṣalāḥ's work maintained the form of lectures with only a rough organization, Ibn Ḥajar submits the entire field to a strict logical structure. The book begins, "Either a report is transmitted through innumerable chains of transmission, or through numerable chains more than two, or through two chains of narration, or through one ..." In this manner, Ibn Ḥajar finally gathers together the scattered descriptions of the practice of hadith experts through the centuries into a steel frame of divisions, sub-divisions, terms, and definitions. Ibn Ḥajar's well-argued judgments in discussions of disputed issues and his insistence on precision in terminology brought a logic and organization that were familiar to students of the various shariʿa-related disciplines of that day but that were not usual in hadith studies.

Scholars continued to write significant works in the field, and they continue to do so. At the same time Ibn Ḥajar's logical organization of the field and Ibn Ṣalāḥ's summary of the issues and the significant positions scholars had taken in the field, continue to provide the discipline with its broad shape.

Recent Developments

In general, for many centuries Sunni Muslims have been practicing Islam throughout the world within the framework of four schools: the Ḥanafī, the Mālikī, the Shāfiʿī, and the Ḥanbalī. Those who take their practice from the collective decisions of any one

school are known as *muqallid*: people who practice *taqlīd*. A *muqallid* may be extremely knowledgeable; his decision to work within the framework of the scholarly decisions of a single school makes him a *muqallid*.

Aside from all of these schools, there have been individuals who examine the evidence for each practice and decide on the correct practice based solely on their reading of the texts of Qur'an and hadith. Obviously, only a person of considerable knowledge can take this route. And, even among *muqallids*, in theory a person who has the ability to examine the evidence directly is not allowed to ignore the primary evidence and cling to *taqlīd*. As an empirical matter, usually *muqallid* scholars question the ability of each of these individuals to understand the primary texts in this manner. Proving an individual incompetent will not endear the critic to the individual or his students and followers, so arguments get acrimonious.

Over the centuries, the work of those who refuse to adhere to one school has brought forward a cluster of issues in which their interpretation of the texts seems to go against the position of the schools. The thinking of the schools in these issues is often complex and based on global demands of the positions scholars of the school have taken on various issues, while the independent thinkers bring forward simple, easy-to-understand, and seemingly unambiguous texts. Thus, while it takes considerable knowledge to derive the ruling for a specific issue through studying texts based on global demands of positions taken on other issues, it is easy to argue that the schools are hide-bound followers of what their elders say while they ignore clear commands of the Qur'an and hadith. As a result, these independent thinkers gain not-so-independent-thinking followers. Such groups of people who commit themselves to follow only texts regardless of the positions of the local schools have arisen in various areas throughout Islamic history. In modern Arab-Muslim history, this group of people who prefer the eclectic style to the systematic one call themselves "Salafis."

With some notable exceptions, the study of hadith after Ibn Ḥajar took the direction of interpreting hadiths. Ibn Ḥajar and other experts of his age (such as Dhahabī) seemed to have explored the issues surrounding the verification of hadiths so thoroughly that all that was left was to consistently apply the rules that they had derived. Scholars committed to schools would identify the level of reliability of a hadith, and then they would strive to interpret it in a way that made sense within the framework of the decisions of their schools. Those of Salafi inclination, in a generic sense, would identify the places where the decisions of the schools departed from the demands of reliable hadiths. In either case, the factors that participate in reliability were not up for discussion.

Historical sensibility balks at the idea of single individuals changing the course of history, but I am unable to escape the impression that the efforts of one Salafī activist, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, have weighed in heavily in a change of atmosphere in hadith studies that has taken place since about 1980. Albānī began with the standard Salafī demand that people leave their following of social custom and tradition and turn to following the pristine Islam preserved in the texts of the Qur'an and hadith. But his insistence that today nobody has the right to quote a hadith without evaluating it from first principles brought about the greatest change.

That Albānī demanded such revaluation of hadiths from anyone quoting a hadith, and then his own practical steps to determine the reliability of hadiths afresh caused a furor among the *muqallids*, and even some Salafis were taken aback. For the purposes of our story, the most important result was that a generation of university students tried to evaluate any hadith they would use in their dissertations.

Although *muqallid* hadith experts complained about this trend by describing the knowledge required to evaluate a hadith, it took over a decade or so for the first backlash from within the Salafi camp. Would-be hadith critics focused on the first four conditions of Ibn Ṣalāh's definition of the sound hadith: that the hadith be reported (i) by reliable people of (ii) sound religious practice, (iii) through a continuous chain of narration, and (iv) going back all the way to the Prophet. They would give the condition that (v) the hadith not be unusual and that (vi) it not contain a hidden defect only perfunctory notice in a comment at the end of the evaluation to the effect that "there is nothing apparently unusual about the hadith and we are not able to find any hidden defects in it."

But serious scholars of Salafi inclination gradually became aware that these last two conditions are precisely those that are the focus of hadith criticism in the second and third centuries. A hadith that is narrated by a weak narrator need not necessarily be weak, and a strong narrator can also make a mistake. Usually, a weak narrator will make mistakes and a reliable narrator will not. But the hadith expert will examine each hadith as reported through various chains of narration to see what the case actually was, and such examination is well beyond the reach of the ordinary university student.

The most important contemporary studies take up issues that were seen as having been settled and codified by Dhahabī and Ibn Ḥajar and other experts of the ninth/fifteenth century, and they go through the literature of the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries to see if what had been settled could actually be established. In the process, these studies revise many particular decisions of the scholars like Dhahabī and Ibn Ḥajar, and they revive an appreciation of the subtlety of the methods of the scholars of the second/eighth to fourth/tenth centuries.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Dr. Behnam Sadeghi, Muntasir Zaman, and my elder brother, Arshad Zaman, who read drafts of this chapter, corrected numerous errors in it, and provided perceptive comments that helped me shape it.

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 1st ed. Riyadh: Dār al-Hijra li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzīʿ.</p> | <p>Aʿzamī, M.M. 1978. <i>Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature</i>, 2nd ed. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications. 1st ed. 1968: Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islamī.</p> <p>Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismaʿīl. 1400.
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Further Reading

There are numerous excellent works at introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels along with research articles and books in Arabic. However, the material in English either treats the field as a list of terms that need definition or it engages in polemics either trying to demonstrate or refute the authenticity of the hadith literature. So, unfortunately, I am unable to recommend a few simple, readable, and accurate presentations of the principles of Muslim hadith criticism as it was practiced and as it was encoded in the works of medieval scholars.

Abdul-Jabbar, Ghassan. 2007. *Bukhari*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Although not a description of the field of hadith

criticism, through a study of one of its prime practitioners one can get a flavor of the things it involved. The description of

critical methods does not get beyond those of the post-Ibn Hajar era.

- Brown, Jonathan. 2009. *Hadith: Muḥammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. Oxford: Oneworld. The first three chapters of this book form the only readable introduction to Muslim hadith criticism in English that I would recommend for a beginner.
- Ibn Ṣalāh al-Shahrazūri. 2006. *Kitāb maʿrifat anwāʾ ʿilm al-ḥadīth*, translated by Eerik Dickinson, as *An Introduction to the Science of the Hadith: Kitāb Maʿrifat Anwāʾ ʿIlm Al-Hadith*. Great Books of Islamic Civilization. Reading: Garnet. The translator took on the impossible task of

translating a very technical manual of hadith criticism without the aid of footnotes and explanations. As a result, the book is only useful to get a first impression of the types of things Muslim hadith critics dealt with.

- Lucas, Scott. 2004. *Constructive Critics, Ḥadīth Literature, and the Articulation of Sunnī Islam: The Legacy of the Generation of Ibn Saʿd, Ibn Maʿīn and Ibn Ḥanbal*. Leiden: Brill. This is a difficult book but it provides a well-researched academic grounding to the type of vision of the development of hadith and related disciplines that forms the narrative background to this chapter.

The following Arabic works are good introductions to the field.

- al-ʿAwnī, al-Sharīf Abū Ḥātim. 1421 [2001] *Khulāṣat al-taṣīl fī ʿilm al-jarḥ wa ʿl-taʿdīl*. Mecca: Dār ʿālam al-fawāʾid. This is a brief introduction to narrator criticism from the point of view of a practitioner of the art. It is based on lectures delivered in a mosque in the Sacred Precinct of Mecca.
- al-ʿAwnī, al-Sharīf Abū Ḥātim. 1427 [2007]. *Sharḥ mūqīzat al-dhahabī*. Cairo: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī. This is Dhahabī's brief classic introduction to hadith criticism. The explanatory notes by al-ʿAwnī make it accessible to the beginner.
- Malibari, Hamza. 1423 [2003]. *ʿUlūm al-ḥadīth fī ḍawʾ taṭbīqāt al-muḥaddithīm al-nuqqād*. Beirut: Dār ibn Ḥazm. This is a well-thought-out reorganization of Ibn Ṣalāh's treatise, along with the author's attempt to revive the style of criticism of the critics of the second and third centuries.
- Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm, Raḍī al-Dīn ibn al-Ḥanbalī. 1326 1st ed. 1408 2nd ed. *Qafw al-ʿathar fī ṣafw ʿulūm al-athar*, edited by ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda. Halab: Maṭba al-maṭbūʾāt al-islāmiyya. This is a brief elementary treatise written from the point of view of the schools of law. The copious footnotes make it a good introductory work.
- Ibn Kathir. (n.d.). *Al-Bāʾith al-ḥathīth*, edited by Aḥmad Shakir. Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-ʿIlmiyya. This is a classic presentation of post-Ibn Hajar hadith criticism.
- al-Judayʿ, Abd Allāh Yūsuf. 1424 [2003]. *Tahrīr ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Rayyān. A little beyond the elementary level, the book is useful as an introduction to the discussions in contemporary hadith studies.