

Critical Hadith Methodology: How the Critique of a Hadith Works

Introduction:

Data permeates every aspect of human life. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a rigorous methodology for analyzing and verifying sources of information. In today's digital age, where content is easily shared across various platforms, discerning between truth and falsehood is increasingly difficult. The prevalence of misinformation, disinformation, and biased narratives underscores the necessity for individuals to approach information critically. This entails questioning the credibility, reliability, and motives behind the information presented.

Similar concerns gave rise to *muḥ addithūn* (traditionists, or hadith critics) and the development of critical methodologies for evaluating hadith reports. For the traditionists, report criticism wasn't merely a methodology for navigating the present world but, more importantly, a means to securing a favorable outcome in the afterlife.

After the passing of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ from this world, there arose a need for the Muslim community to authenticate his traditions, or *sunnah*, an integral component of Islamic law and practice. The most paramount source of the *sunnah* is the body of reports that document the Prophet's statements and actions—the *hadith*—as observed and preserved by the shining stars he left in his stead—the Companions. But as those who had personal contact with the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) passed on and Muslim territories continued to expand, it became clear that the mere preservation of hadith was insufficient. Foreseeing the looming threat of hadith forgery and miscommunication, the *muḥ addithūn* began to standardize a highly critical methodology for examining reports to determine what was soundly attributable to the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) and what was not.

What Comprises a Hadith?

A hadith is generally defined as any report containing a statement, action, or tacit approval attributed to the Prophet, or, by extension, his Companions and their Followers. Every hadith has two main components: (1) the action or statement being transmitted, and (2) the source of the action/statement, which is represented by a chain of reporters who transmitted it. The former is known as the *matn* and the latter as the *sanad*.

1. The *sanad/isnād* (lit. chain) of a hadith is its chain of transmitters, each transmitter using the one before him as a reference, that connects us to the report's content. The two main points of analysis in a *sanad* are:
 - a. the status of each individual reporter (*rāwī*) as a credible source of information (bolded in examples below) and
 - b. the modes of transmission they are using to receive and transmit the report (italicized in examples below).
2. The *matn* (text of the report): This is the actual content of the report that is being passed on from one individual to another (within quotations in examples below). Hadith reports range from being as short as a sentence to as long as an entire detailed unfolding of events.

Take, for example:

Sarah told me that

↳ **Her father** told her that

↳ **The principal** said to him:

“School is canceled tomorrow.”

Or, we may use a classical example from the hadith literature:

Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī states that:

↳ ‘ **Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr al-Ḥumaydī** narrated to us that he said:

↳ **Sufyān** narrated to us that he said:

↳ **Yahyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Anṣārī** narrated to us that he said:

↳ **Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Taymī** told me that he had heard

↳ ‘ **Alqamah ibn Waqqas al-Laythī** stating: *I heard*

↳ ‘ **Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb** on the pulpit when he stated: *I heard*

↳ **the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ** state:

“Certainly, deeds are by intentions...”

Critical Evaluation of Hadith

The task of the *muḥaddith* in evaluating the soundness of a report involves rigorously evaluating the various components of the *sanad*, or chain of transmission. To achieve this, he leverages his extensive knowledge of narrator biographies and historical timelines, along with a verifiable and critical methodology, to conduct a thorough investigation of the chain. In brief, the *muḥaddith* considers five main factors in determining the soundness of a report, two of which relate to the reporter, one which relates to the connectedness of the chain of reporters, and two additional considerations to ensure the absence of anomalies or hidden defects.

These five considerations are the following:

1. The accuracy (*ḍabṭ*) of each reporter

2. The probity/moral integrity (‘ *adāla*) of each reporter
3. An unbroken chain of reports (*ittiṣ āl*)
4. The absence of anomaly, i.e. the report’s contradicting how other reliable reporters transmit the report
5. The absence of hidden defects (‘ *ilal*) that only experts are able to reveal, such as an omission of a reporter in an apparently unbroken chain.

When a report meets these five conditions, it is considered sound (ṣ *aḥ iḥ*) or fair (*ḥasan*). Otherwise, it is considered weak (ḍ *a‘ īf*) and unsuitable as a legal or theological proof. Weak reports are usable in historical and ethical discussions, unless they are severely weak, in which case they are treated like forgeries or false attributions (*mawḍ ū‘* reports).

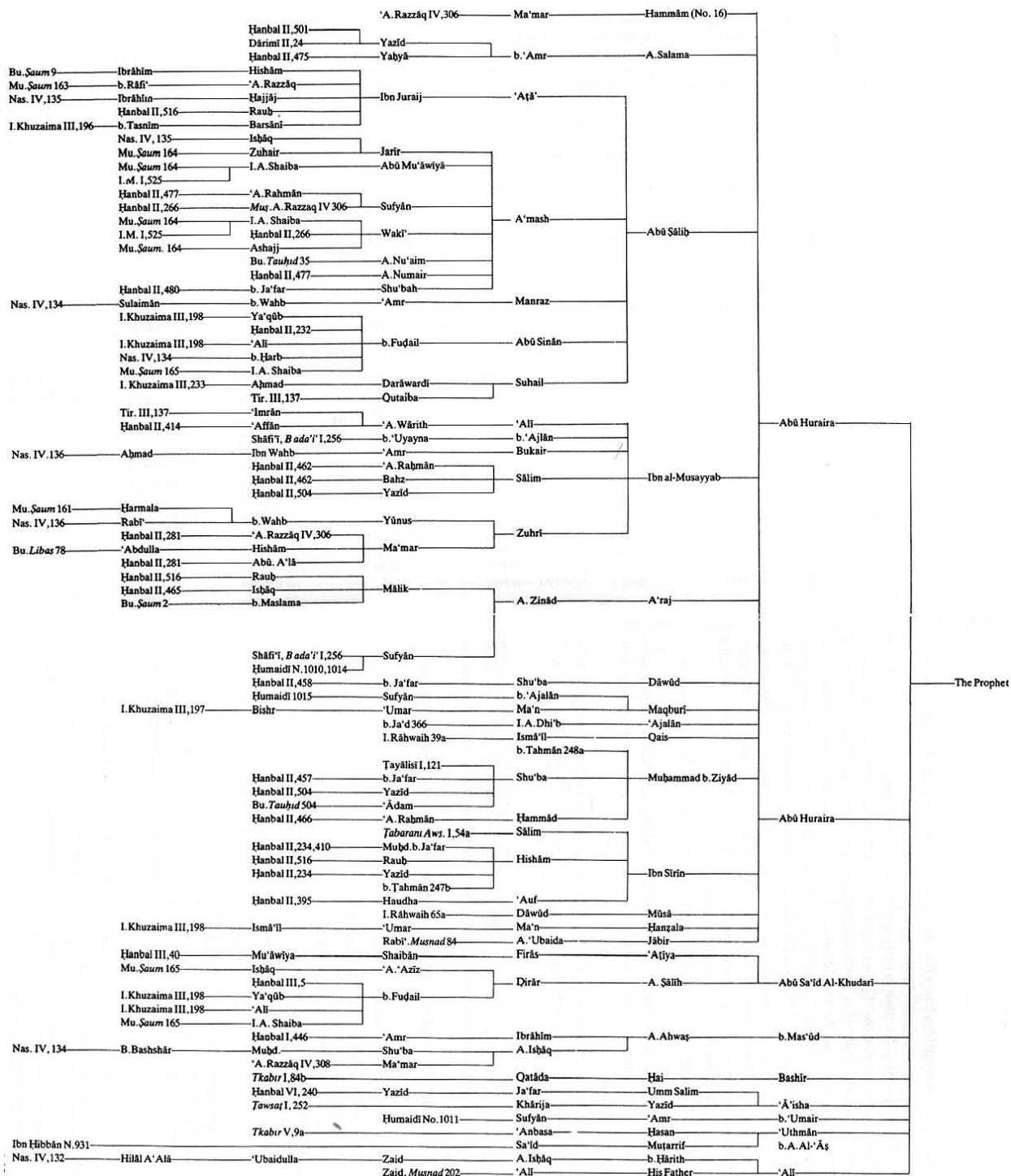
Let us use the aforementioned chain as an example to demonstrate briefly how these five considerations are applied:

- Before any analysis, the muḥ addith first needs to identify the chain within those texts of the hadith corpus that are considered primary sources. To the onlooker, discovering one hadith amongst thousands of others may seem like finding a needle in a haystack, but for the muḥ addith who has spent countless hours familiarizing himself with these texts, this practice becomes second nature. Our particular chain happens to be for the first report that Imam al-Bukhārī brings in his magnum opus, his Ṣ *aḥ iḥ* collection.
- After identifying the chain in al-Bukhārī’s Ṣ *aḥ iḥ* , the muḥ addith then proceeds to engage in chain analysis. He begins by working through the chain and identifying each narrator, assuring that each and every one is recognized for their moral integrity and their accuracy in hadith transmission. While the texts of biographical accounts and narrator criticisms are full of the information, they are all but a reference for the muḥ addith, who, after rigorously studying these texts, recognizes these individuals as if they were his own close acquaintances:
 - ‘ **Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr al-Ḥ umaydī** ... *“Of course, the great Imām Ḥ umaydī; the most famous teacher of Bukhārī, who even accompanied Imam al-Shāfi‘ ī in the pursuit of ḥ adīth.”*
 - **Sufyān** ... *“This is not Sufyān al-Thawrī; as Ḥ umaydī is the student, this is undoubtedly Sufyān ibn ‘ Uyaynah, who has taken hadith from 70 Tābi‘ īn (Followers of the Companions).”*
 - **Yah yā ibn Sa‘ īd al-Anṣ ārī → Muḥ ammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Taymī → ‘ Alqamah ibn Waqqaṣ al-Laythī** ... *“All three of these individuals are transmitters from the generation of the Tābi‘ īn, Yah yā being the youngest and ‘ Alqamah being the eldest. Their reputations precede them.”*
 - ‘ **Umar ibn al-Khaṭ ṭ āb** ... *“Umar, the great Companion of the Messenger of Allāh and mighty caliph of Islam, may Allāh be pleased with him.”*
- As each narrator is checked and recognized as a reliable transmitter, the muḥaddith also scrutinizes the chain for any



trace of an interruption, as an unexplainable missing link in the chain can bring the report's authenticity into question. The muḥaddith again must tap into his knowledge of the expansive network of hadith transmitters, along with their birth and death dates, taking note of the likelihood that each narrator in the chain could truly have met the one he claims to transmit from (*liqā' /samā'*). In the case of our example, the student-teacher relationship between every two individuals is well established.

- The muḥaddith moves on to the final step, which is to investigate whether the chain contains any hidden problems or is anomalous.
 - The nature of hidden problems is that they are commonly only privy to those experts who are contemporaneous to the source of the problem. The muḥaddith will reference the works of these experts that preceded him to rest assured that there were no issues with the chain in question.
 - Anomalies are only discovered through comparative chain analysis (*i' tibār/takhrīj*), where the muḥaddith now must seek out any and all other chains for this report so as to corroborate its content. If, for example, he discovers that this chain is transmitting contrary to the vast majority of chains, it would raise a concern that someone must have made an error. Here is a scan of just one example of what the cross-chain analysis of a hadith can look like when mapped out:



Some of the many questions that the muḥaddith seeks to answer, alongside their related terminologies in the science of hadith critical methodology, include the following:

<i>Jahālah</i> (being unknown) vs. <i>Shuhrah</i> (being well-known)	Is the reporter known? Do we know their name, status as a reporter, distinguishing characteristics? How well is the individual recognized as a transmitter of reports? Do experts vouch for them?
<i>Ḍabt</i> (accuracy)	Is the reporter known for having strong or weak memory? If they transmit reports using written documentation, are their documents reliable? Did the reporter consistently report accurately throughout their life, or did senility or loss of documents affect their transmission?
<i>ʿAdālah</i> (probity, integrity)	Is the reporter unknown to have orthodox or unorthodox beliefs? Is he righteous and dignified in his comportment?
<i>Kidhb</i> vs. <i>Ṣidq</i>	Is he known to fabricate reports? Is he known to lie in other facets of life?
<i>Gharābah</i> & <i>Shudhūd</i>	Are there corroborative chains for this report? Have the peers of this reporter transmitted contrary to him despite having the same source?
<i>Inqīṭ āʿ</i> vs. <i>Ittiṣ āl</i>	Is there any omission in the chain? Is it possible for this alleged student to have met the teacher he claims to have taken from? Is the omission problematic?
<i>Ḥ aml</i> & <i>Adāʿ</i>	Does the wording of the chain of transmission indicate any sort of omission?

Hadith Content Evaluation

Following this rigorous chain analysis is a detailed examination of the report's content, which is often left to the *faqīh*, or legal expert. This involves comparing the report's content against other reports and legal evidence of varying epistemic values, to ultimately ascertain its significance within the framework of Muslim belief and ritual practices.

Some of the questions the legal expert will seek to answer regarding the content of the report include the following:

<i>Taʿ āruḍ</i>	Does the wording of the report contradict that of other reports on the same topic? How can we make sense of both?
<i>Tarjīh</i> & <i>Taʿ wīl</i>	Does the report <i>apparently</i> contradict what is known from certain sources, such as the Quran, sound reason, or truly empirical data? How can we harmonize our understanding



	of them all?
<i>Naskh</i>	Does the content of the report relate to laws of early Islam which were later abrogated?
‘ <i>Amal al-Ş aḥ ābah</i>	Does the practice of the Companions of the Prophet seem to show that the report is of a practice that was irregular?
<i>Qiyās al-Uş ūl & Qawā’ id</i>	Do the principles extracted from the evidences of the religion as a whole support the apparent meaning of the report?
‘ <i>Umūm al-Balwā</i>	Is the report from a single chain despite its content pertaining to a matter that should be privy to the majority of people?