What is a Sahih Hadith?

What is a Hadith?

'Something which is ascribed to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).'

This can be of four forms:

i. His sayings: For example, 'Merely actions are judged according to intention.'

ii. His actions: For example, the Companions reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) recited Surah al-Tur in Maghrib Prayer.

iii. His descriptions: For example, the Mother of the Faithful Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) reported that the Prophet's moral qualities were exactly like the Qur'an.

iv. His silent approvals: This works on the notion that no prohibited saying or action stemmed from the Companions except that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) corrected them. So when they did or said something and the Prophet remained silent, then this meant he approved of the act. For example, lizard meat was once consumed in the presence of the Prophet and he remained silent. Also, Abd Allah ibn Umar said:

> In the lifetime of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), we used to say 'the best people of this Ummah after the Prophet is Abu Bakr, followed by Umar and Uthman (may Allah be pleased with them).' The Prophet would hear this and would not condone it.[1]

Why are Ahadith important?

1. It forms the second fundamental source of our religion after the Qur'an.[2]

2. The sayings of the Prophet act as an interpretation for the Qur'an and his actions form a practical example of how to fulfil the teachings of the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an refers to the obligatory nature of the Pilgrimage (Hajj). It is only through the Sunna of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that we can establish how *exactly* we perform this ritual.

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[1] p. 11. *Al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya*, Prof. Abd al-Muhdi ibn Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Hadi.

[2] There are four foundations for our religion (i) the Holy Qur'an; the unchanged and miraculous word of Allah Almighty (ii) the Sunna; this is the vast material that informs us of the Prophet's life (iii) the Ijma; this is the scholarly consensus, which came into force after the Prophet left this world (iv) Qiyas; this is where the scholars perform analogical investigation to deduce a ruling on a new matter, based on the material available from the Qur'an and Sunna.

3. It is the avenue to success in this world and the hereafter. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said in a Hadith reported by Ibn Abbas:

> Certainly I am leaving two things with you; if you hold on to them then you will never go astray. They are the book of Allah and the Sunna of his Prophet.[3]

Owing to its importance, the early scholars geared their effort towards recording and preserving the sayings and actions of the Prophet. As a result, a branch of knowledge appeared called Ilm al-Hadith (or Usul al-Hadith), which helped in categorising the different ranks of Hadith. This programme will focus on the highest form of Hadith, a Sahih Hadith. This means it means the highest criteria in terms of strength and authenticity.

An example of a Sahih Hadith.

Owing to the complexity of this particular branch of Islamic knowledge, it is better to answer the question through an actual example of a Sahih hadith, and then explain how it reached this status.

The example that will be used is the universally accepted saying of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), where he identifies love for him as the essence of faith. He said:

لا يؤمن أحدكم حتي أكون أحب اليه من والده و ولده و الناس أجمعين

'None of you is a [true] believer until I become more beloved to him that his father, his son and mankind in its entirety.'

This Hadith has been recorded in the following works:

Sahih al-Bukhari (Book of Faith, Hadith no. 13/14)
Sahih Muslim (Book of Faith, Hadith no. 62/3)
Sunan al-Nasa'i (Book of Faith and Shari'ah, Hadith no. 4927/8)
Sunan Ibn Maja (Introduction, Hadith no. 66)
Musnad Ahmad (the remaining chains of the excessive narrators, Hadith no. 13402/13449)
Sunan al-Darimi (Riqaq, Hadith no. 2624).

For the purpose of our research, we will look at the Hadith found in the works of Imam al-Bukhari (Hadith no. 14)

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[3] p. 15. *Al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya*, Prof. Abd al-Muhdi ibn Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Hadi.
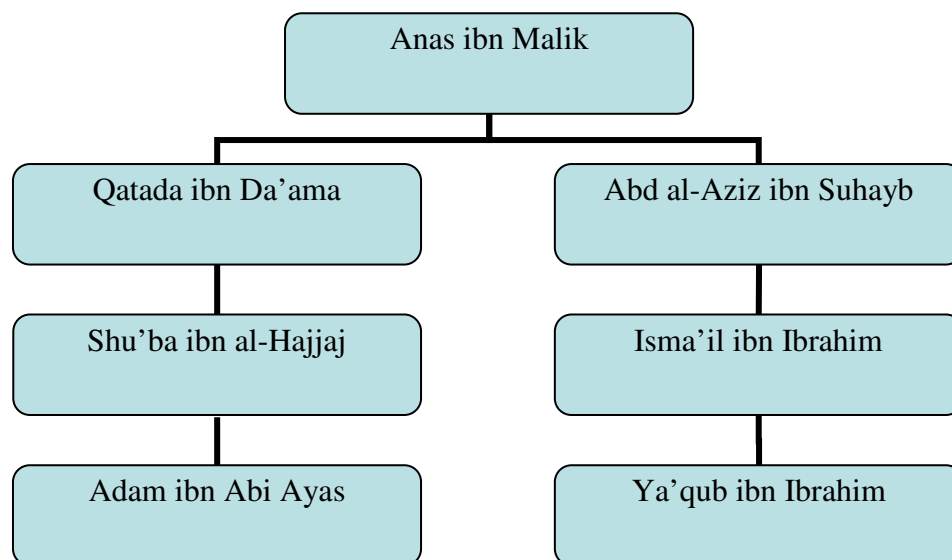
Spanning the distance; the Sanad.

Imam al-Bukhari died in 256/898, almost three centuries after the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) left this world. How could he know and be sure that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said these words such a long time ago?

In order to bridge the gap, the Hadith scholars devised a system whereby they could be sure the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said these words. This system was the Sanad (also called Isnad). In essence, this was a chain of transmission, whereby Imam al-Bukhari confirmed he heard it from his teachers (belonging to an early generation), who heard it from his teachers, who heard it from his teachers, until it passed down to the Companions.
This chain is called the Sanad. The actual text of the Hadith is called the Matn, in this case 'None of you is a [true] believer until I become more beloved to him that his father, his son and mankind in its entirety.'

The Sanad for this chain.

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │    Anas ibn Malik    │
                    └──────────┬──────────┘
              ┌────────────────┴────────────────┐
    ┌──────────────────┐             ┌──────────────────────┐
    │ Qatada ibn Da'ama │             │ Abd al-Aziz ibn Suhayb │
    └─────────┬────────┘             └──────────┬───────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐             ┌──────────────────────┐
    │ Shu'ba ibn al-Hajjaj │          │  Isma'il ibn Ibrahim  │
    └─────────┬────────┘             └──────────┬───────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐             ┌──────────────────────┐
    │ Adam ibn Abi Ayas │             │   Ya'qub ibn Ibrahim  │
    └──────────────────┘             └──────────────────────┘
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Anas ibn Malik (d. 91) heard it from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).
Abd al-Aziz ibn Suhayb (d. 130) and Qatada ibn Da'ama (d. 117) heard the Hadith from Anas.
Isma'il ibn Ibrahim (d. 193) heard it from Abd al-Aziz.
Shu'ba ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 160) heard it from Qatada.
Ya'qub ibn Ibrahim ibn Kathir (d. 252) heard it from Isma'il.
Adam ibn Abi Iyas (d. 220) heard it from Shu'ba.

Condition One; The continuation of the Sanad (Ittisal).

Once we have the names, we need to check whether they could have actually heard from one another.

This is called Ittisal and forms the first condition of a Sahih Hadith. They must have all overlapped with one another in terms of period. So in order for the Hadith to be Sahih, Abd al-Aziz must have lived in the time of Anas, Isma'il ibn Ibrahim must have lived in the time of Abd al-Aziz and so on.
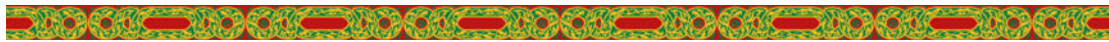
Could the reporters have met one another?
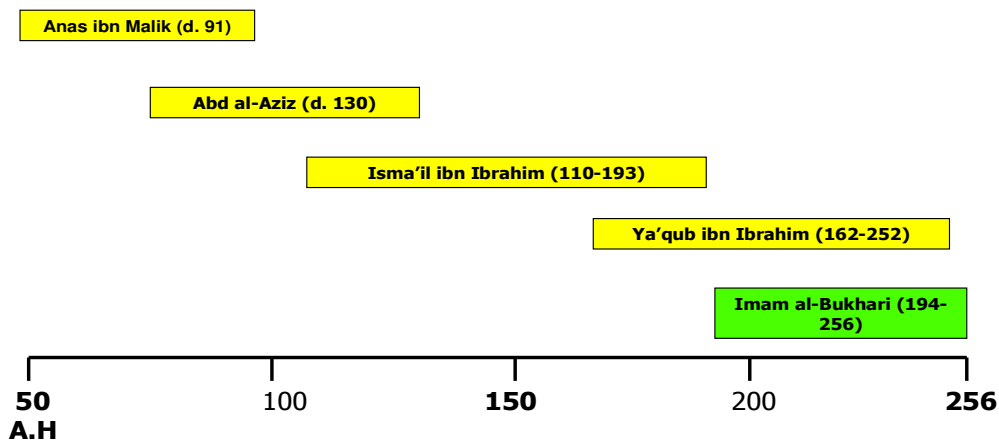
Imam al-Bukhari went one further when it came to the continuation of the Sanad. He wanted proof not that the two transmitters lived at the same time (and that they could have hypothetically met), but proof that they *actually* met. Other Hadith masters said that being mere contemporaries was sufficient, like Imam Muslim.

Condition Two; The integrity of the reporters.

Once we have established who heard it and that they met one another, we need to know what they were like. Were they good people? Were they pious? This is the second condition of a Sahih Hadith, the good faith of the reporters, or their Adala. So all reporters have to be sane, Muslims, marked by Taqwa, free from Fisq and known for their courteous, gentlemanly behaviour. The Hadith master Ibn al-Mubarak was asked about what constitutes the Adala (integrity) of a reporter. He replied:

He must have five qualities (i) he attends congregational prayer (ii) He does not drink (iii) his religion does not have any defects in it (in terms of belief) (iv) he does not lie (v) he is not intellectually weak.[4]

All reporters have to undergo this check, except the Companions because Allah himself has already vouched for their integrity in the Qur'an:

<div dir="rtl">رضي الله عنهم و رضوا عنه</div>

Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him (58:22).

Condition Three; The accuracy of the reporters.

They may be good Muslims, but does that mean they are reliable reporters? Could they remember what they heard? Did they pass it on exactly how they heard it? This is the third condition of a Sahih Hadith, the accuracy of the reporter. This means that the reporter must be able to preserve what he heard, either my memory or from written records and then transmit it to others in exactly the same form he originally heard it.

● The development of Rijal literature.

The need to check the reporters background led to Rijal literature, where the Hadith masters gathered all the possible information possible on each and every reporter. For example, we have the following information about Isma'il ibn Ibrahim, thanks to the vast efforts of the Hadith scholars:

His full name:	Isma'il ibn Ibrahim ibn Miqsam al-Asadi.
His aliases:	Famously known as Ibn Ulayya.
When he was born:	110 A.H.
When he died:	193 A.H.
Who he heard Hadith from:	Abd al-Aziz ibn Sohayb, Sulayman al-Taymi, Humayd al-Tawil, Aasim al-Ahwal, Ayyub, Ibn Awn, Jurayri, Ma'mar and many more.
Who reported from him:	Shu'ba, Ibn Jurayj, Hammad ibn Zayd, Ibn Wahb, al-Shaf'i, Ahmad and many more.
His family life:	Married Aliyya bint Hassan and had two children.
His occupation:	He used to trade between Basra and Kufa.
What others said about him:	
	Yunus ibn Bukayr: 'Ibn Ulayya is the Sayyid (leader) of the Hadith Masters.'
	Ahmad: 'He was the most reliable reporter in Basra.'
	Yayha ibn Ma'in: 'He was reliable (Thiqa), trustworthy, a truthful Muslim and a God-fearing individual.'

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[4] p. 27. *Ilm Jarh wa al-Ta'dil*, Prof. Abd al-Muhdi ibn Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Hadi.

The Hadith masters compiled enormous biographical dictionaries on the Muslims involved in Hadith transmission. They also graded them too, so that each reporter was identified as being reliable, truthful or otherwise.

Examples of such works

a. *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. This large account was written by Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) and included the biographical information of over four thousand reporters.

b. *Mizan al-I'tidal*. Written by Imam al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1348), this covers eleven thousand individuals.

c. *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*. In this famous work compiled by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 852/1448), the biographical details of over 4000 reporters are included.

Condition Four; Conforming with more senior reporters.

Even after these checks, the Hadith masters would compare the Hadith with what other more reliable reporters had narrated on the same subject. If a reporter transmitted a Hadith, but it did not comply with something that a *more* reliable reporter had transmitted, then it would be rejected. This is the fourth condition of a Sahih Hadith; that the report should not contradict what more reliable reporters have transmitted.
An example of when someone reliable has been rejected in favour of someone more reliable is Abd al-Wahid ibn Ziyad. He reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'When one of you sleeps after Fajr, then lie on your right side.' The more authoritative reporters have narrated this is an action of the Prophet, not his words. In order words, the Companions reported that the Prophet would lie on his right side after reading Fajr prayer.[5]

Condition Five; No Hidden problems.

Finally, the Hadith masters would check that there were no other hidden problems not covered in the above four conditions. If there is, then the Hadith is called Mu'allal and it is rejected.

The definition of a Sahih Hadith.

ما اتصل سنده بنقل العدل تام الضبط عن مثله الي منتهاه من غير شذوذ و لا علة
"[A Hadith] where the chain is continuous, with the transmission of just, accurate narrators, from beginning to end, without the Hadith being Shaz or having a hidden ailment in it."

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[5] p. 87-8. *Taysir Mustalah al-Hadith*. Prof. M. Tahhan.

Finding corroborations for this Hadith.

The research of the Hadith masters did not end there. They would constantly search for supporting chains for existing Ahadith. So, for example, the above Hadith was reported by other great Hadith masters, with their own chains of transmission:

Other related matters.

a. Why is Sahih al-Bukhari so respected?

-It was the first work reserved for Sahih only. Prior to this work, the Hadith masters aimed to gather all they could from the Ahadith of the Prophet. Imam al-Bukhari was the first to compile a book for the Sahih only.
-The Ahadith are of the highest standard.
-It is the most authentic book after the Qur'an.
-Because he was a brilliant scholar and academic.
-Yet he still depended on the spiritual too. He used to perform Istikhara prayer and two Nafls at the Prophet's final resting place in Madina before including each and every Hadith into his book.[6]

b. How many Ahadith are there in Sahih al-Bukhari?

-7275 Ahadith. Excluding the repetitions there are about 4000 Ahadith.
-However, he knew 300,000 (of which 100,000 were Sahih).

Sahih Muslim: With repetitions, there are 12,000 Ahadith in Sahih Muslim. With the omission of the repetitions, there are approximately 4,000 narrations.

c. Did al-Bukhari and Muslim include all Sahih narrations?

Al-Bukhari and Muslim did not set out to include *all* the Sahih in their book, nor did they abide by this. Al-Bukhari said: 'I only included Sahih narrations in my book, and I left out many Sahih narrations in fear the book would become too long'. Imam Muslim said, 'I have not included all the Sahih I know here. I have merely included those narrations which the scholars have agreed upon'.[7]

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[6] p, 53. Siddīqī, M. (1993) *Hadith Literature; its Origin, Development & Special Features.* Edited by Murad, A.H. Islamic Texts Society: Cambridge.

[7] In other words, the narrations which meet the conditions which the scholars agree upon.

d. Where can we find the remaining Ahadith which al-Bukhari and Muslim left out?

We can find them in famous, reliable books of Hadith such as:
- Sunan al-Tirmidhi
- Sunan Ibn Maja
- Sunan Abu Dawud
- Sunan al-Nasa'i
- Muwatta Malik
- Sunan al-Bayhaqī.
- Musnad Ahmad.
- Sahih ibn Khuzayma
- Sahih ibn Hibbān.
- Mustadrak al-Hākim
- Sunan al-Dāraqutnī

Summary.

The example shows the exactitude, precaution and objectivity the Hadith masters employed when it came to recording the Ahadith of the Prophet.
Sahih is so high that even Hasan is acceptable, and in some cases, so is Da'if. In short, there are three ranks of Hadith.

a. **Sahih Hadith**.
b. **Hasan Hadith**. This is exactly the same as a Sahih Hadith in definition and in usage, except that the accuracy of the reporter is of a lesser stage.
c. **Da'if Hadith**. This is a weak Hadith, because one (or more) of the conditions of Sahih are missing. As a result, such a Hadith cannot be used to prove something as Haram or Halal, or to support a fundamental belief of our religion. It can however be used to encourage good Islamic behaviour and discourage evil and sinful acts.

Further Reading.

All of these books are available on Amazon.

Hadith Literature; its Origin, Development & Special Features. **Siddiqi, M. (1993) Edited by Murad, A.H. Islamic Texts Society: Cambridge.**

The Mukhtasar al-Quduri -- A manual of Islamic Law according to the Hanafi School. **Translated by T. M. Kiani. Ta-ha Publishers, 2010.**

Shamaa'il Tirmidhi. **Darul Isha'at (2003).**