

What is the Sunnah?

ما هي السنة؟

[إنجليزي - English]

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What is the Sunnah? A Revelation like the Quran

The Sunnah, according to the scholars of hadeeth, is everything that has been related from the Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, of his statements, actions, tacit approvals, personality, physical description, or biography. It does not matter whether the information being related refers to something before the beginning of his prophetic mission, or after it.



Explanation of this definition:

The statements of the Prophet include everything the Prophet said for various reasons on different occasions. For example, he said:

“Verily deeds are but by intentions, and every person will have only what he intended.”

The actions of the Prophet include everything that the Prophet did that was related to us by his Companions. This includes how he made ablutions, how he performed his prayers, and how he made the Hajj pilgrimage.

The tacit approvals of the Prophet includes everything that his Companions said or did that he either showed his favor towards or at least did not object to. Anything that had the tacit approval of the Prophet is as valid as anything that he said or did himself.

An example of this is the approval that was given to the Companions when they used their discretion in deciding when to pray during the Battle of Bani Quraydhah. God's Messenger had said to them:

“None of you should perform your afternoon prayers until you arrive at Bani Quraydhah.”

The Companions did not arrive at Bani Quraydhah until after sunset. Some of them took the Prophet's words literally and postponed the afternoon prayer, saying: “We will not pray until we get there.” Others understood that the Prophet was only indicating to them that they should hurry on their journey, so they stopped and prayed the afternoon prayer on time.

The Prophet learned about what the two groups had decided, but did not criticize either of them.

As for the Prophet's personality, this would include the following statement of Aishah (may God be pleased with her):

“God's Messenger was never indecent or vulgar, nor was he loud at the marketplace. He would never respond to the abuse of others with abuses of his own. Instead, he would be tolerant and forgiving.”

The physical description of the Prophet is found in statements like the one related by Anas (may God be pleased with him):

“God's Messenger was neither overly tall nor was he short. He was neither exceedingly white nor black. His hair was neither excessively curly nor lank.”

The Relationship between the Sunnah and Revelation

The Sunnah is revelation from God to His Prophet. God says in the Quran:

“...We have sent down to him the Book and the Wisdom...” (Quran 2:231)

The Wisdom refers to the Sunnah. The great jurist al-Shafi’i said: “God mentions the Book, which is the Quran. I have heard from people who I consider authorities on the Quran that the Wisdom is the Sunnah of God’s Messenger.” God says:

Indeed, God conferred a great favor on the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His signs and purifying them and instructing them in the Book and the Wisdom.

It is clear from the preceding verses that God revealed to His Prophet both the Quran and the Sunnah, and that He commanded him to convey both to the people. The Prophetic hadeeth also attest to the fact that the Sunnah is revelation. It is related from Mak’hool that God’s Messenger said:

“God gave me the Quran and what is like it from the Wisdom.”

Al-Miqdam b. Ma’dee Karab relates that God’s Messenger said:

“I have been given the Book and with it something like it.”

Hisan b. Atiyyah relates that Gabriel used to come to the Prophet with the Sunnah just like he would come to him with the Quran.

An opinion from the Prophet was not merely his own thoughts or deliberations on a matter; it was what God revealed to him. In this way, the Prophet was different from other people. He was supported by revelation. When he ex-

exercised his own reasoning and was correct, God would confirm it, and if he ever made a mistake in his thinking, God would correct it and guide him to the truth.

For this reason, it is related that the Caliph Umar said from the pulpit: “O people! The opinions of God’s Messenger were correct only because God would reveal them to him. As for our opinions, they are nothing but thoughts and conjecture.”

The revelation that the Prophet received was of two types:

A. Informative revelation: God would inform him of something by means of revelation in one form or another as mentioned in the following Quranic verse:

“It is not for a human being that God should speak to him except as revelation or from behind a barrier, or by sending a Messenger who reveals by His leave whatever He wishes. Verily, He is Exalted, All-Wise.” (Quran 42:51)

Aishah related that al-Harith b. Hisham asked the Prophet how revelation came to him, and the Prophet answered:

“Sometimes, the angel comes to me like the clanging of a bell, and this is the most difficult for me. It weighs upon me and I commit to memory what he says. And sometimes the angel comes to me in the form of a man and speaks to me and I commit to memory what he says.”

Aishah said:

“I had seen him when the revelation came to him on an extremely cold day. When it was over, his brow was full of perspiration.”

Sometimes, he would be asked about something, but he would remain silent until revelation came to him. For example, the Meccan pagans asked him about the soul, but the Prophet remained silent until God revealed:

They ask you concerning the soul. Say: ‘The soul is from the affairs of my Lord, and of knowledge you have but little’. (Quran 17:85)

He had also been asked about how inheritance was to be divided, but he did not answer until God revealed:

“God commands you regarding your children...” (Quran 4:11)

B. Affirmative revelation: This is where the Prophet exercised his own judgment in a matter. If his opinion was correct, revelation would come to him affirming it, and if it was incorrect, revelation would come to correct him, making it just like any other informative revelation. The only difference here is that the revelation came as a result of an action that the Prophet first did on his own.

In such instances, the Prophet was left to use his own discretion in a matter. If he chose what was right, then God would confirm his choice through revelation. If he chose wrong, God would correct him to protect the integrity of the faith. God would never allow His Messenger to convey an error to other people, because this would cause his followers to fall into error as well. This would contravene the wisdom behind sending Messengers, which was that the people henceforth would have no argument against God. In this way, the Messenger was protected from falling into error, for if he ever erred, revelation would come to correct him.

The Prophet’s Companions knew that the tacit approval of the Prophet was actually the approval of God, because if

they ever did something contrary to Islam during the Prophet's lifetime, revelation would come down condemning what they did.

Jabir said: "We used to practice coitus interruptus¹ back when God's Messenger was alive." Sufyan, one of the narrators of this hadeeth, commented: "If something like this was forbidden, the Quran would have prohibited it."

The Sunnah in Islamic Law

The Difference between the Sunnah and the Quran

The Quran is the foundation of Islamic Law. It is the miraculous speech of God that was revealed to the Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by way of the angel Gabriel. It has been transmitted to us with so many chains of authority that its historical authenticity is unquestionable. It is written down in its own volume, and its recitation is a form of worship.

As for the Sunnah, it is everything besides the Quran that came from God's Messenger. It explains and provides details for the laws found in the Quran. It also provides examples of the practical application of these laws. It is also either direct revelation from God, or decisions of the Messenger that were then confirmed by revelation. Therefore, the source of all the Sunnah is revelation.

The Quran is the revelation that is formally recited as an act of worship, and the Sunnah is revelation that is not for-

1 Coitus Interruptus: Withdrawal of the penis before emission of sperm during sex. – IslamReligion.com.

mally recited. The Sunnah, though, is just like the Quran in that it is revelation that must be followed and adhered to.

The Quran takes precedence over the Sunnah in two ways. For one thing, the Quran consists of the exact words of God, miraculous in nature, down to the last verse. The Sunnah, however, is not necessarily the exact words of God, but rather their meanings as explained by the Prophet.

The Position of the Sunnah in Islamic Law

During the Messenger's lifetime the Quran and Sunnah were the only sources of Islamic Law.

The Quran provides the general injunctions that formed the basis of the Law, without going into all the details and secondary legislation, with the exception of a few injunctions that are established along with the general principles. These injunctions are not subject to change over time or with the changing circumstances of the people. The Quran, likewise, comes with the tenets of belief, sets down acts of worship, mentions the stories of the nations of old, and provides moral guidelines.

The Sunnah comes in agreement with the Quran. It explains the meanings of what is unclear in the text, provides details for what is depicted in general terms, specifies what is general, and explains its injunctions and objectives. The Sunnah also comes with injunctions that are not provided by the Quran, but these are always in harmony with its principles, and they always advance the objectives that are outlined in the Quran.

The Sunnah is a practical expression of what is in the Quran. This expression takes many forms. Sometimes, it comes as an action performed by the Messenger. At other times, it is a statement that he made in response to something. Some-

times, it takes the form of a statement or action of one of the Companions that he neither prevented nor objected to. On the contrary, he remained silent about it or expressed his approval for it.

The Sunnah explains and clarifies the Quran in many ways. It explains how to perform the acts of worship and carry out the laws that are mentioned in the Quran. God commands the believers to pray without mentioning the times that the prayers had to be performed or the manner of performing them. The Messenger clarified this through his own prayers and by teaching the Muslims how to pray. He said: “Pray as you have seen me praying.”

God makes the Hajj pilgrimage obligatory without explaining its rites. God’s Messenger explains this by saying:

“Take the rites of Hajj from me.”

God makes the Zakah tax obligatory without mentioning what types of wealth and produce it is to be levied against. God also does not mention the minimum amount of wealth that makes the tax obligatory. The Sunnah, though, makes all this clear.

The Sunnah specifies general statements found in the Quran. God says:

“God commands you regarding your children: to the male, a portion equal to that of two females...” (Quran 4:11)

This wording is general, applying to every family and making every child an inheritor of his or her parents. The Sunnah makes this ruling more specific by excluding the children of Prophets. God’s Messenger said:

“We Prophets leave behind no inheritance. Whatever we leave behind is charity.”

The Sunnah qualifies unqualified statements in the Quran. God says:

“...and you find no water, then perform tayammum (dry ablution) with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands... (Quran 5:6)

The verse does not mention the extent of the hand, leaving the question of whether one should rub the hands up to the wrist or the forearm. The Sunnah makes this clear by showing that it is to the wrist, because this is what God’s Messenger did when he performed dry ablution.

The Sunnah also comes emphasizing what is in the Quran or providing secondary legislation for a law stated therein. This includes all the hadeeth that indicate that Prayer, the Zakah tax, fasting, and the Hajj pilgrimage are obligatory.

An example of where the Sunnah provides subsidiary legislation for an injunction found in the Quran is the ruling found in the Sunnah that it is forbidden to sell fruit before it begins to ripen. The basis for this law is the statement of the Quran:

Do not consume your property amongst you unjustly, except it be a trade among you by mutual consent.

The Sunnah contains rulings that are not mentioned in the Quran and that do not come as clarifications for something mentioned in the Quran. An example of this is the prohibition of eating donkey flesh and the flesh of predatory beasts. Another example of this is the prohibition of marrying a woman and her aunt at the same time. These and other rulings provided by the Sunnah must be adhered to.

The Obligation of Adhering to the Sunnah

A requirement of believing in prophethood is to accept as true everything that God’s Messenger said. God chose His

Messengers from among His worshippers to convey His Law to humanity. God says:

“...God knows best with whom to place His Message...” (Quran 6:124)

God also says:

“...Are the Messengers charged with anything but to convey the clear Message?” (Quran 16:35)

The Messenger is protected from error in all of his actions. God has protected his tongue from uttering anything but the truth. God has protected his limbs from doing anything but what is right.

God has safeguarded him from showing approval for anything contrary to Islamic Law. He is the most beautifully complete of God’s Creations. This is clear from how God describes him in the Quran:

“By the star when it sets. Your companion has neither gone astray nor has he erred. Nor does he speak of his own desire. It is only revelation that has been revealed.” (Quran 53:1-4)

We see in the hadeeth that no circumstances, no matter how trying, could prevent the Prophet from speaking the truth. Being angry never affected his speech. He never spoke falsehood even when he was jesting. His own interests never swayed him from speaking the truth. The only goal that he sought was the pleasure of God Almighty.

Abdullah b. Amr b. al-Aas related that he used to write down everything that God’s Messenger said. Then the tribe of Quraish forbade him from doing so, saying: “Do you write down everything that God’s Messenger says, and he is but a man who speaks in contentment and in anger?”

Abdullah b. Amr stopped writing and mentioned this to God's Messenger who told him:

“Write, for by Him in Whose hand is my soul, only truth comes forth from this.” ...and pointed to his mouth.

The Quran, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the jurists all point to the fact that obeying God's Messenger is obligatory. God says in the Quran:

“O you who believe, obey God and obey His Messenger and those in authority among you. If you fall into dispute about a matter, refer it back to God and His Messenger if you believe in God and the Last Day...”
(Quran 4:59)