



CONCEPTUALIZING SUNNAH AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO LIFE OF MUSLIMS

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Abstract

The work is titled conceptualizing Sunnah and its significance to the life of Muslims. Sunnah is to complement the Qur'an in clarification and explanation. For Muslims to attain the proper teachings of religion, he has to understand the sunnah of the Prophet. The aim of this article is to discuss the significance Sunnah to the life of Muslims. An Analytical method was used in this research. This paper discussed the concept of Sunnah among different scholars, the early development of sunnah, the impact of sunnah among Muslims. Among the findings of the research is that, the major problem which brings confusion among the Muslims is their inability to distinguish between different contexts and background of the word sunnah; sometimes the understanding of the concept of sunnah is relative; it also revealed that Islam cannot be comprehended without understanding sunnah. The paper recommends that Muslim scholars should enlighten the students on the need to be able to identify what is sunnah from what is not sunnah in regard to their creeds, practices and their activity; also Muslims should disregard any practice that contradicts the Prophetic Sunnah.

Introduction

Islam is a religion of beliefs and practices. Rules and regulations have been formulated to guide the Muslims toward understanding of their religion, the Sunnah, alongside the Qur'ān, has been considered to be one of the primary sources of Islamic Law. For Muslims to be successful in his life, it is imperative to make the Prophetic Sunnah worthy for emulation. Prophet Sunnah consisted his actions, words, decisions, recommendations, advice, and life which represents the valuable guide for all those who wish to understand the true meanings and teachings of Islam. Qur'an

emphasizes the importance of obeying the Prophet and adhering to his path. Thus, understanding the concept of Sunnah is necessary for Muslims in order not to fall into confusion and deviations. In order to understand the significance of Sunnah to Muslims, there is a need to look into its concept.

Concept of Sunnah

Sunnah is an Arabic word that originated from the root S-N-N that literally means a clear path or a beaten track. It has also been used to imply normative practice, or an established course of conduct. It may be a good example or a bad one, and it may be

set by an individual, a sect or a community. It also means (Lane: n.d) “flow and continuity of a thing with ease and smoothness” Ibn Manzur (n.d), defines Sunnah as a “commendable straightforward manner of conducting oneself. Over time, the term Sunnah was increasingly used in the context of human behaviour, and as “a way, course, rule, mode or manner of acting or conducting life”, thus becoming equivalent to the word *sirah*. Technically, Sunnah refers to all that is narrated from the Prophet, his acts, his sayings and whatever he has tacitly approved, plus all the reports which describe his physical attributes and character (Abu Shuhbah: 1989). The term *hadith* has become a synonym for the term Sunnah, though there is some difference in their meanings. *Hadith* refers to whatever statements, acts, approvals, physical or character descriptions that are attributable to the Prophet (peace be upon him) along with his biography before or after the beginning of his prophethood. It is thus synonymous with the term Sunnah.

Scholastic approaches to the concept of Sunnah

An important point in comprehending the concept of Sunnah is distinguishing between various contextual backgrounds of the word Sunnah among the Muslim scholars. The word Sunnah has been by Muslim scholars, based on their field of specializations and different background.

Sunnah, according to Usul fiqh scholars, refers to only the statements, acts and approvals of the Prophet

(peace be upon him). It also refers to whatever is supported by authority from Shari‘ah; the opposite of *bid‘ah* (alkhattabi: 1998). This is because their concern is the sources and methodology of Islamic law. They defined Sunnah base on their perspective of what is or is not an authority in Islamic law.

But according to *Fuqahah i.e Muslim scholars*, the term Sunnah refers to recommended acts authentically attributable to the Prophet (peace be upon him) the doer of which is rewarded and the non-doeer is not punished (Usfur: 2003). It is also used to refer to the opposite of *bid‘ah* as in the statement: Sunnah divorce and *Bid‘ah* divorce (Zarabozo: 2000), to mean a mode of divorce approved and rejected by Shariah.

But, Sunnah, according to the scholars of *Hadith* is what has been passed down from the prophet (peace be upon him) of his statements, actions, tacit approvals, manners, physical characteristics or biography, regardless of whether it was before he was sent as Prophet or afterwards (Asubai: 1985).

Based on the above definition, the Qur'an is the most important part of the Sunnah conveyed by the Prophet (peace be upon him). It may also be said that *hadiths* were the containers in which the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was conveyed during his life time and after his death. The *ulamas* are unanimous to the effect that Sunnah is a source of *Shari'ah* and that in its rulings with regards to *halal* and *haram*. it stands

on the same footing as the Qur'an' (Abu shuhbah: 1989).

The Sunnah of the Prophet is what is translated into his actions which make him an exemplary leader, a caring and trusted husband, a tolerant religious teacher and, above all, a committed statesman. None of his sayings contradicts his actions, in other words, the Sunnah is the practical aspect of the life of the Prophet. (Noun: 2000).

Muslim theologian used the term Sunnah to refer to the foundations of the faith, the well-established obligatory deeds, and the matter of creeds and definitive ruling of Islam. This terminology became popular as more and more sects appeared. Some scholars would use the term Sunnah to refer to established articles of faith and distinguished them from the beliefs of newly-formed ideological group. Many of later scholars used Sunnah to specifically refer to what relates to creed, because that forms the foundation of the religion and whoever contradicts it has deviated from right channel (Zarabozo, 2000)

In other words, some used the word Sunnah in comprehensive sense as anything that forms Islamic doctrines in term of creed and faith either believed in or practiced or preached by the Prophet (peace be upon him), and his companions. This implies that the practices and beliefs of the companions of the prophet (peace be upon him) are considered part of the Sunnah because they followed methodology as that taught by the Prophet SAW. Thus, if a person deviates from the way of the *sahaba* in their understanding and practice of the religion, they are, in essence, turning away from the Sunnah itself.

By this, those who follow the mainstream doctrine code explicitly as thought of by the prophet (peace be upon him) are known as ahlal-Sunnah. Those who refuse to follow the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are known as ahlal bid'ah people of heresy (Al-Asbahani: 1990)

Legal theories and Concept of Sunnah

There has always been tension among the classical jurists of different schools of jurisprudence (madhahib) about the status and the positions of concept of Sunnah on legal theories and its relationship with the Qur'an on whether Sunna is to be considered as part of Revelation (wahy) on par with the Qur'an. If the answer to this question were in the affirmative, it would mean that Sunna could be employed as an independent and self-sufficient source of Islamic law and theology, in addition to being utilized as a legitimate exegetical and hermeneutical tool (ibn hazm, 1983). While stressing the uniqueness and inimitability of the Qur'an as Revelation par excellence, the classical Muslim scholarship, partly as the result of what has been described as a theory of recited (wahy matlū) and un-recited revelation (wahy ghayr matlū) apply the former to the Qur'an and the latter to the Sunna. Ibn hazm (1983) describes the revelation (wahy) from God Almighty to His Messenger (s.) comes in two forms: One of the two is recited (in ritual) revelation (wahy matlū) which takes form of the Qur'an, which is an inimitably organized written masterpiece. The other form of revelation consists of transmitted sayings, the reports that originated

from God's Messenger (s.). These sayings do not constitute an inimitably arranged written composition and, although this form of revelation is read, it is not used in ritual recitation (*lā matlū*)

However, some of the jurists adopted the view that "the Sunna rules over the Qur'an (*qādiya 'alā al-kitāb*) and the Qur'an does not rule over the Sunna (Al-Baghdādī: 1938). Ahmad bn Hanbal was asked if the Sunnah is baffling the Book (Quran), he replied, I have never dared say so, but I say that the Sunnah interprets and demonstrates the Quran (shatibi, 2001). When Aisha (RA) was asked about the the morality of the Prophet, she answered his morality being the Quran itself. This indicates the actions, practices and utterances of the Prophet are all taken from the Quran. Being the Prophet was demonstrator of Quran, this includes elaboration, specification and restriction of the verses of the Quran

Some scholars are of the opinion that Sunnah can abrogate the Qur'ānic verses. This opinion was refuted by many scholars among them was Rida (1978) who says the Sunnah cannot abrogate Quran, he further elucidated that the main pillars of Islam being the book of Allah occupying the first rank, after it comes the Prophetic Sunnah. Also Imam Shafi'I (1309) said, whatever judged and decided by the Prophet (peace be upon him) has definitely come from the Quran. As a corollary, Sunnah, became recognized as a legitimately descriptive tool to be employed in Qur'ānic exegesis and Islamic legal theory and as an

independent source of Islamic law and less so theology.

Practical reinforcement of the Sunnah in the early Islamic eras

In early era of Islam, Muslims in general make effort to extend the significant of hadith in the society. From this enforcement, Muslim Scholars deduced the methodological tools used in defining and determining the concept of Sunnah during the pre-classical era and contrast these tools with those implied by the classical definition of Sunnah. Additionally, this will give us an insight into the epistemological boundaries and methodological mechanisms which will help in understanding the conceptual content of Sunnah.

Sunnah in Prophetic Period

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a leader of the Muslim community received the revelation, explained it to the Sahaba i.e his companions and put it into practice. For example, the two important religious institutions of Islam prayer and *Zakat* were revealed to the prophet. But no details were supplied about them by the Qur'an. "*Aqimu's Salata i.e to esterblish prayer*" is the Qur'anic injunction and it was the prophet himself who by his actions gave detail of the service. *Wa'atuz-Zakat* i.e to give charity is another injunction, constantly repeated in the Qur'an, yet it was the prophet who gave the rules and regulations for its payment and collection (Ammar: 2005). The prophet founded a state, which he administered as supreme head, maintaining internal peace and order, heading armies from external defence, judging and deciding

litigations of his subject, punishing the criminals and legislating in all walks of life. All this was mentioned in the Qur'an without details; Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave the full details through his actions and his explanations. All these potentially constituted Sunnah.

The *Sahabah* were very much interested in all the teachings of the prophet. Every word of the Prophet was of their conviction and their understanding of legal status of Prophet Actions and words law to them and all his actions were virtuous and exemplary in their eyes. They were very eager to know about his teachings to the extent that, they do not want to leave him even for a second. It was also the practice among the companions that whenever two of them met, they inquired from each other whether the prophet has explained something in their absence (Noun, 2000).

Sunnah during the rightly guided Caliphs

After the demise of the Prophet (peace be upon him), especially with the expansion of Muslim empires, many cases arose regarding political, social, economic, administrative and judicial affairs. Some of these cases cannot be found in details, so the only means to resolve these cases was through the studying of Sunnah. Thus, Sunnah becomes the second source of Islamic teachings. In order to solve these problems, the Muslims always tried to follow the commands of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Hence, this brought about a great need for the transmission of Sunnah during

the period of the *sahabah* (Ammar: 2005).

During this period of time, Prophet's Companions observed his embodiment of the Qur'anic message and how it was applied in society in terms of his behaviour, word and deed. The Prophet's action-behavioural system was quite naturally described by the Muslim community as Sunnah and carried a degree of normativeness whose anchoring point was the Qur'an. In cases of the performance of congregational prayers and ritual purification, for example, the Muslim community in Medina internalised and embodied these practices by engaging in their daily performance with the Prophet. Therefore, both Companions and the Medinan community became the collective embodiment and perpetuators of these aspects of the Prophet's Sunnah (Kailani, 1978).

The Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) reflected and understood the function, nature, the scope and the relationship between the Qur'an and Sunnah. They clearly watched the Prophet (peace be upon him) and inquired about what appears to be ambiguous to them. It appears [that] for the Companions and the early Followers of the Prophet, the divine activity manifested in the mission of Muhammad was a unitary reality in which the divine word, the prophetic guidance, and even the example and witness of all who participated in the sacred history of the Prophet's time, were all perceived as complementary, integral aspects of a single phenomenon. This attitude of the *Sahabah* made them fully

comprehend the wisdom of the message brought by the Prophet (peace be upon him) and hence attained proper faith. Many verses of the Qur'an commend them and render them (i.e. *Sahabah*) subject of emulation too (NOUN: 2000).

Companions, the sources and perpetuators of the Prophet's Sunnah as understood at that time, dispersed to various provinces of the ever expanding Muslim Empire. With the establishment of the Companions in these provinces, people who did not have the opportunity to see the Prophet first-hand or were born after the Prophet's death, termed Successors (*tab'īn*), were eager to find out from them what the Prophet did, how he behaved and acted. Companions, however, were facing increasingly new problems to which they had no specific Prophetic precedent due to the nature of the Sunnah as it was understood at that time. In such cases, Companions used their own judgment and reason in order to arrive at solutions, which were still considered as falling under the general aegis of the Prophetic precedent. Al-Azami (1978) also noted this by remarking that sometimes the norms drawn analogically from the practice or the sayings of the Prophet were also called Sunna. This assertion is also substantiated by the fact that Muslims at that time "regarded as authoritative not only the precepts and practices of the Prophet, but also those of his Companions", especially, those that have been agreed upon by all or the group of them.

The Function of the Sunnah in relation to Qur'an

The need for Sunnah as a source of Islamic Law stems from the actual nature of the Qur'anic Revelation itself and the role played by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Some of the verses of Qur'an seem ambiguous, some need specifications, limitations or even interpretations as such, and the Prophet interpretation is needed. Therefore, the function served the following:

- **Reinforcement:** In many instances, (Al-Ghazali: 1998) the *hadīth* would reinforce the meaning of the Qur'anic verse or provide a similar meaning relating to the verse, thereby taking on the same orientation, even if it may seem that the relationship between the *hadīth* and the verse is a distant one. The Prophet (peace be upon him), for example, says:

O Allah! There is none that can prevent that which You bestow, and there is none that can bestow that which You prevent. (An-nisa'i: hadīth no. 1324.)

This meaning is no different from the following statement of Allah, the Most High and Honoured:

Whatever of mercy (i.e. good) Allah may grant to Humankind, none can withhold it, and whatever He may withhold, none can grant it thereafter. And He is the All-Mighty, the Wise (*Suratul Fatir: 2*).

Examples of this type are indeed many. For example, the *Messenger* peace be upon him Prohibited the use of gold and silver utensils for eating and drinking, and prohibited the wearing of silk, and to sit upon it (use

it to cover chairs, etc). (*ad-Dārimī*: 1987: hadīth no. 2037).

This ruling enforced by the Sunnah is drawn from the Qur'anic prohibition of extravagance and lavishness, which regards the opulent and the lavish as enemies of all reform, as opponents of all prophets, and as a fact or that leads to the collapse of all nations:

And We did not send a warner to a township, but those who were given the worldly wealth and luxuries among them said: 'We believe not in the (message) with which you have been sent (*Suratul Saba*: 34).

The prohibition of using graveyards as places of prayer which was enforced by the Sunnah is in reality a definitive protection of Allah's Oneness, a concept from which Christians deviated by taking as places of worship the graves of their saints.

- **Specification:** The Sunnah (Alsiba'I: 1987) takes the position of reinforcing the objectives of the *Qur'an*, whether explicit or implicit. It also explains its general aspects and clarifies its ambiguities. There are *Sunanh* (traditions) that specify general rulings of the *Quran*, as in the verse:

Allah commands you as regards your children's (inheritance); to the male, a portion equal to that of two females (Q. 4: 11).

The Sunnah clarifies that a child that murders (his parents) gets no portion of inheritance. In the verse: *Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead animals, blood (Q. 5: 3),*

The Sunnah clarifies that there are two allowable categories within these prohibitions. The Prophet (peace be upon him said:

Made allowable for us are two categories of dead animals and two categories of blood: Fish and locusts and liver and spleen. (Al-Ghazali: 1998)

- **Confirmation:** The Sunnah (Abdul-Khalq: 1986) may consist of rules that merely confirm and reiterate the Qur'an, in which case the rules concerned originate in the Qur'an and are merely corroborated by the Sunnah. It is also a source of rulings that make easier some of the requirements that the Noble Book commands. For example, the Qur'an commands that the feet be washed when performing ablution, regarding it as one of the pillars of *wudū'*. The cleaning of the feet is therefore a necessary requirement for the prayer, i.e., for it to be regarded as having been fulfilled correctly. The *Messenger* of Allah (peace be upon him) however, specified that if one had worn socks or leather socks after having cleaned his feet, then it was not necessary to wash the feet every time one performed the abolution. It is sufficient to just wipe the top of the foot, over the sock or shoe, as an indication of the pillar of *wudū'* that has been exempted (Muslim: 2000: hadīth no. 414).
- **Clarifications:** The Sunnah (Abu-Shuhbah: 1989) may consist of an explanation or clarification to the Qur'an; it may clarify ambivalence (*mujmal*) in the Qur'an, qualify its absolute statements, or specify the general

terms of the Qur'an. This is once again the proper role that the Sunnah plays in relation to the Qur'an: it explains it. Once again, a substantial part of the Sunnah falls under this category. It is, for example, through this type of Sunnah that Qur'anic expressions like *salat*, *zakat*, *hajj* and *riba*, etc., have acquired their juridical (*shari'ah*) meanings. To give another example, with regard to the contract of sale the Qur'an merely declares sale to be lawful as opposed to *riba*, which is forbidden. This general principle has later been elaborated by the Sunnah which expounded the detailed rules of *Shari'ah* concerning sale, including its conditions, varieties, and sales which might amount to *riba*. The same could be said of the lawful and unlawful varieties of food, a subject on which the Qur'an contains only general guidelines while the Sunnah provides the details. (Badran: nd) Again, on the subject of bequest, the Qur'an provides for the basic legality of bequest and the rule that it must be implemented prior to the distribution of the estate among the heirs (al-Nisa', 4:12). The Sunnah supplements these principles by enacting additional rules which facilitate a proper implementation of the general principles of the Qur'an. (Badran: nd)

- **Establishment:** The Sunnah may consist of rulings on which the Qur'an is silent, in which case the ruling in question originates in the Sunnah itself. This variety of Sunnah, referred to as *al-Sunnah*

al-muassisah, or 'founding Sunnah', neither confirms nor opposes the Qur'an, and its contents cannot be traced back to the Noble Book. It is only this variety of Sunnah which lies in the centre of the debate as to whether the Sunnah *is* an independent source of law. To give some examples: the prohibition regarding simultaneous marriage to the maternal and paternal aunt of one's wife (often referred to as 'unlawful conjunction'), the right of pre-emption (*shuf'*), the grandmother's entitlement to a share in inheritance, the punishment of *rajm*, that is, death by stoning for adultery when committed by a married Muslim - all originate in the Sunnah as the Qur'an itself is silent on these matters (Ibn Qayyim: 2000).

Recommendations

In the light of the forgoing study, the researchers recommend the followings

1. Muslims should pay attention in understanding the teachings of Islam as mentioned in the Prophetic Sunnah.
2. Muslims should disregard any practice that contradicts the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)
3. Muslim scholars should emphasize to the students on the need to identify what is Sunnah from what is not Sunnah in regard to their creeds, practices and their activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sunnah being the practice and habits of the Prophet plays an important role in moulding



and shaping the life of a Muslim. This is because whoever follows the Sunnah of the Prophet shall have full reward from Allah. The Prophet will never do or say anything except by the divine directive from Allah (Wahy). Thus a Muslim who follows the Sunnah shall never go astray. It is an obligation upon all Muslims not to differentiate between the Qur'aan and the Sunnah, with regard to the obligation of accepting both of them together and establishing Laws based on both of them. Indeed, this is the guarantee that will prevent them from drifting to the right and the left, and from returning to deviation.

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