

Lesson 22: Sources Of The Sharʿa

1. The Qurʿān & the Sunna of the Prophet

The Muslims during the days of Prophet Muhammad lived by the sharʿa by following the **Qurʿān** and the **Sunna**. *Sunna* means the example of the Prophet. (Sunna is sometimes written as ‘sunnat’.)

Was not the Qurʿān enough on its own? The Qurʿān is a book of guidance which was sent for the entire human world till the end of time. As such, it only deals with the general issues and mentions only the basic principles underlying the Muslim way of life. The Qurʿān is more like a constitution than a book of law. The details were left to the Prophet.

The Qurʿān itself clearly explained this relationship between the Prophet and itself in the following verses:

He raised up among the common people a Messenger from among themselves to recite to them His revelations, to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the wisdom. (62:2)

And We have revealed to you (O Muhammad) the Reminder (that is, the Qurʿān) so you may clarify to the people what has been revealed to them, and so that they may reflect. (16:44)

These two verses definitely prove that Prophet Muhammad was not just a ‘mail-man’ whose only job was to deliver the Qurʿān to us. He was a teacher and a commentator of the Qurʿān. Even his actions are a source of guidance for Muslims:

You have a good example in Allah’s Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the last day, and remembers God oft. (33:21)

The obedience to the Prophet has been considered as the proof of loving Allah:

Say (O Muhammad), ‘If you love Allah, then follow me; (if you do so) Allah will love you and forgive for you your sins.’ (3:31) To show the importance of obeying the Prophet, Allah further says:
Whoever obeys the Prophet has surely obeyed Allah. (4:80)

The Qurʾān is not only silent on the details of things which can change over time, it is also silent on the rules of worship which can never change. For example, the Qurʾān in twenty-five different places commands the Muslims to say the daily prayers (ṣalāt), but not once has Allāh explained how the Muslims are to say their prayers. (The only exception to this statement is that of *ṣalātu ʾl-khawf*, the prayer said in a battle-field or when one is in danger.) This silence on the part of the Qurʾān, I believe, was for the specific purpose of forcing the people to go to the Prophet, ask him for details and follow his example.

2. The Example of the Imams

After the Prophet's death, the Muslims were very much divided on the issue of leadership. This gave birth to the two groups known as the Shi'a and the Sunnis. The Shi'a lived by the sharʿa by following the Qurʾān, and the **sunna** of the Prophet and **of the Imams**.

The sunna, in Shi'a definition, means "the sayings, deeds and silent approval of the Prophet and the twelve infallible Imams of Ahlu 'l-bayt." Although the issue of the leadership has already been discussed in another lesson in Part One, I would like to mention one reason why the Imams of Ahlu 'l-bayt are preferable as the source of the sharʿa than anyone else.

The Muslims of the early days realized the importance of the Prophet's sunna and started to memorize his sayings known as hadith. Later generations preserved the saying they had heard from the companions of the Prophet in the books of hadith. Even the actions of the Prophet, observed by his companions, were preserved in writing. But this process of preserving the sunna of the Prophet was not immune from mistakes and forgery. Many sayings were invented and wrongfully attributed to the Prophet during the early period of the Islamic history, especially during the Umayyid era. At times, the rulers bribed the companions to fabricate 'hadith' in their favour and/or against their opponents. At other times, some people invented 'hadith' for apparently good causes not realizing that they were using the wrong means of trying to make people more religious!

Abu 'Ismah, Faraj bin Abi Maryam al-Marwazi was asked: "From where have you got all these traditions narrated through 'Ikrimah, from Ibn 'Abbās, from the Prophet, describing the reward of reciting each and every sūrah (chapter) of the Qurʾān?" He said, "I found people interested only in the *fiqh* of Abu Hanṣafah and *maghṣi* of Ibn Ishāq; therefore, I forged these ahādith for the pleasure of God to bring them back to the Qurʾān."

In this background of the early development of hadith, we must find an authentic and informed source for the sunna of the Prophet. When you look at the Muslims of the Prophet's days, you can find no one who was more knowledgeable, informed, reliable and closer to the Prophet than the Ahlu 'l-bayt, the family of the Prophet: Fātimah, 'Ali and their sons. After all, it is the Qurʾān which testifies to their spiritual purity of the highest form by saying: ***"Verily Allah intends to purify you, O the Ahlu 'l-bayt, a thorough purification."*** (33:33) Combine this verse about the Ahlu 'l-bayt's purity with the following: ***"It***

is the holy Qurʿān in a preserved tablet, none shall touch it but the purified ones.” (56:79) The real sense of this verse is that the Qurʿān which is “in a preserved tablet” is not accessible to anyone except those who are purified by Allāh. This shows that the Ahlu ʿl-bayt could understand the Qurʿān better than any other Muslim.

It is for this very reason that Allāh commanded His Messenger to ask the people to love his Ahlu ʿl-bayt: ***Say (O Muhammad), ‘I do not ask from you any reward (for teaching Islam to you) except to love my near ones.’*** (42:23) This love was made obligatory because it would automatically entail obedience of those whom one loves. If the Ahlu ʿl-bayt were not truthful, reliable, and worthy of following, would Allāh command us to love them?

These few verses of the holy Qurʿān are enough to show that the best commentators of the Qurʿān and the most authentic source for the Prophet’s sunna are the Imams of Ahlu ʿl-bayt. The Prophet himself said,

“I am leaving among you two worthy things. As long as you hold fast on to them both, you will never go astray after me. One is greater than the other: the Book of Allāh (which is a rope suspended from the heaven to the earth) and my descendants, my Ahlu ʿl-bayt. They will not separate from each other until they come to me at the (fountain of) Kawthar (in the hereafter). Therefore, see how you recompense me by the way you deal with them.”

This is not the place to discuss the authenticity of this hadīth, but it will suffice to quote Ibn Hajar al-Makki, a famous Sunni polemicist. After recording this hadīth from various companions who had heard it from the Prophet at various places and times, Ibn Hajar says, “And there is no contradiction in these [numerous reports] since there was nothing to prevent the Prophet from repeating [this statement] at those various places because of the importance of the holy Book and the pure Family.”¹

We can conclude from these verses and the hadith mentioned above that the Ahlu ʿl-bayt are the divinely appointed commentators of the Qurʿān, and the most authentic and the best source for the sunna. It is for this reason that we prefer them to all other sources.

Even when we quote a hadīth from the Imams of Ahlu ʿl-bayt, it is actually the hadīth of the Prophet which they have preserved as the true successors of the last Messenger of God. Imam Jaʿfar as-Sādiq (a.s.), the sixth Shiʿite Imam, says:

My hadīth is the hadīth of my father, the hadīth of my father is that of my grandfather, the hadīth of my grandfather is that of Husayn [bin ʿAlī], the hadīth of Husayn is that of Hasan [bin ʿAlī], the hadīth of Hasan is that of Amiru ʿl-muʿminīn [ʿAlī bin Abi Tālib], the hadīth of Amiru ʿl-muʿminīn is that of the Messenger of God (s.a.w.), and the hadīth of the Messenger is a statement of Allāh, the Almighty, the Great.”²

The historical circumstances did not allow the opportunity to the first three Imams of Ahlu ʿl-bayt to

formally teach and train their followers in the matters of the sharʿa. It was after the tragedy of Karbala that the Imams, especially the fifth and the sixth Imams, got the opportunity to formally train their followers in the sharʿa laws. The training by these Imams actually laid the foundation for the development of *ijtihād* among the Shiʿas after the occultation of the twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (a.s.).

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During the Minor Occultation (*ghaybat*) of the Present Imam, it was still possible for the Shiʿas to present their problems to the Imam through his specially appointed representatives. These representatives were ʿUthmān bin Saʿd al-Amri (260–265 AH), Muhammad bin ʿUthmān al-Amri (265–305 AH), Husayn bin Rūh (305–326 AH), and ʿAli bin Muhammad al-Samiri (326–329 AH).

However, after the Imam went into the Major Occultation, the problems of the sharʿa were resolved through the process known as *ijtihād* and *taqlīd*—the two most important ways of living by the sharʿa. *Ijtihād*, in Shʿa jurisprudence, means “the process of deriving the laws of sharʿa from its sources.” A person who can do *ijtihād* is known as a “mujtahid”. *Taqlīd* means “to follow the mujtahid in the laws of sharʿa.”

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This lesson is based on *An Introduction to the Sharʿa* by Sayyid M. Rizvi

Question Paper on Lesson 22

Question 1: [15 points]

True or False:

- (a) The Qurʾān is the only source of the sharʿa.
- (b) Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) was the embodiment of the teachings of the Qurʾān.
- (c) Sunna is the second source of the sharʿa.
- (d) All hadith are to be accepted as authentic and correct.
- (e) Abu ʿIsmaḥ was correct in fabricating “ahādith” to bring people closer to the Qurʾān.

Question 2: [20 points]

Why are the Ahlu ʿl-Bayt the most important source for the sunna of the Prophet and commentary of the Qurʾān?

Question 3: [15 points]

Explain by an example (from the lesson or other sources) how the Prophet of Islam cannot be separated from the Qurʾān and its complete understanding.

[1.](#) Ibn Hajar al-Makki, as-Sawā'iq al-Muhriqah, chapter 11, section 1.

[2.](#) In Shi'a sources, see al-Kulayni, al-Usul al-Kāfi, vol. 1, p. 52; in Sunni sources, see ash-Sha'rāfi, at-Tabaqāt al-Kubra, vol. 1 p. 28; Abu Nu'aym, Hilyatu 'l-Awliyā', vol. 3, p. 193, 197.

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