

## Sunnah, from Shi'i and Sunni Viewpoints

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أحمد لله الذي (خلق فرزق فأنطق و ابتدع فشرع و علا فارتفع و قدر فأحسن و صور فأتقن و احتج فأبلغ و أنعم فأسبغ و أعطى فأجزل و منح فأفضل) و الصلاة و السلام على رسوله الكريم محمد و آله الطاهرين

All Praise belongs to God, Who made the creation and provided it (with all that it needed), Who inspired (the souls) and gave them the faculty of speech, Who originated things and laid down the Law, Who is high and exalted, Who ordained and did so in the best manner, Who fashioned the creation and made it firm,

Who set forth His proofs and made them conclusive, Who has bestowed bounties of the creatures and made them plenteous, Who has handed out His gifts and made them plentiful, Who has blessed and done so graciously) May Peace and benedictions be upon His Noble Messenger, Muhammad, and the Pure Ones of his progeny.

All Islamic teachings, including doctrine, ethics, law, and other sciences, which have been received by the Noble Messenger from their celestial source, have been communicated by him to humanity through two means: the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*.

As to the Qur'anic scripture, it consists of the set of statements which the Prophet was heard to make, but whose words as well as meanings have been communicated to mankind by God, the Exalted, as an enduring and everlasting miracle of speech. This collection is known variously as the Qur'an, the Book of Allah (*kitabullah*), the Speech of Allah (*kalamullah*) and *al-Furqan* (lit. the separator, i.e. the standard which separates truth from falsehood):

نَزَلَ بِهِ الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ عَلَى قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُنذِرِينَ بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُبِينٍ

***The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down in a clear Arabic language on your heart that you may be of the warners. (26: 193–195)***

As to *hadith qudsi*, it is also the word of God, the Exalted, but its words are of the kind which were also revealed—to the former prophets.

The *Sunnah*, which is also referred to as *riwayah* (tradition), *hadith* and *nass*, consists of texts whose words are from the Noble Prophet but whose content and meaning is from God. However, in Islamic jurisprudence (*ilm al-usul*) *Sunnah* is considered to include three types: statements (*qawl*), actions (*fi'l*) and tacit approvals (*taqrir*) of the Infallible Ones.

What the jurists mean is the *Sunnah* derived from the Prophet (s) and therefore they have not considered writing as part of the *Sunnah*. However, if *Sunnah* is to include that which has been received through the means of any of the Infallible Imams a fourth kind must be added to these, which is writing. [1](#)

Both the Book and the *Sunnah* must be delivered and communicated by the Noble Prophet to the community in order to be acted upon. There is no problem involved concerning the delivery of the Book to mankind, as it has been received by every successive generation until the present day. Thank God, the Book of God has reached us with its original wording and characteristics and its transmission has been definite and *mutawatir*, and without there being any alteration or corruption in its text.

Doubts raised in this regard by some scholars on each side and the belief that there has been any interpolation (*tahrif*) in the Qur'anic scripture are baseless and unacceptable. Any statements by scholars affirming such a view must be considered an error or lapse, and the lapses of eminent men are also stupendous (زلة الكبير، زلة كبيره).

However in regard to *Sunnah* and *hadith*, which make the topic of this writing, the matter is debatable, firstly, concerning the character of the communication of the *Sunnah* and the Prophet's statements to the Islamic community from the early Islamic era and its transmission through the generations up to the present day, and secondly, concerning the difference between the approach of Imami Shi'is and that of other non-Shi'i Muslim brethren between the method of accessing the *Sunnah*.

We may mention several following points in this regard.

Firstly, that which is considered *Sunnah* and *hadith* by the Shi'ah is the same as that which is considered such by the Ahl al-Sunnah, and both of these Muslim sects take it in the sense of the Prophet's words and statements that were pronounced for the sake of propounding Islamic teachings and sciences.

The misconception that *Sunnah* has some other meaning for the Imami Shi'is and the Ja'fari sect, and that they believe that the Infallible Imams, may Peace be upon them, received the teachings

independently from God and expounded them for the people is one which is entirely false. Rather, the Shi'is and the Imamis believe that the religious teachings and the Divine laws, including doctrine and law and other things, which are derived from the Infallible Imams have been received in their totality as a transmission of the Prophet's *Sunnah* and his teaching.

There is the narration reported by several authorities including Hisham ibn Salim, Hammad and others that:

سمعت ابا عبد الله (ع) يقول: حديثي حديث أبي و حديث أبي حديث جدِّي و حديث جدِّي حديث الحسين و حديث الحسين حديث الحسن و حديث الحسن حديث أمير المؤمنين و حديث أمير المؤمنين حديث رسول الله و حديث رسول الله قول الله عزَّ و جلَّ

We heard Abu Abd Allah ( `a) say: "My hadith is the hadith of my father, and my father's hadith is the hadith of my grandfather, and the hadith of my grandfather is the hadith of al-Husayn, and the hadith of al-Husayn is the hadith of al-Hasan, and the hadith of al-Hasan is the hadith of the Commander of the Faithful, and the hadith of the Commander of the Faithful is the hadith of the Messenger of Allah, and the hadith of the Messenger of Allah is the word of Allah, the Almighty and the Glorious." [2](#)

It is narrated from Jabir ibn Abd Allah al-Ansari that he said:

قلت لأبي جعفر (ع) إذا حدثتني بحديث فاسنده لي، فقال: حدَّثني أبي عن جدِّي عن رسول الله عن جبرئيل عن الله تبارك و تعالی و كلَّ ما أُحدِّثك بهذا الاسناد

I said to Abu Ja'far ( `a) when you narrate for me a tradition, give me also its chain of authorities (*sanad*). He said, "Narrated to my father, from my grandfather, from the Messenger of Allah, from Gabriel, from God, the Blessed and the Exalted, and whatever I narrate to you is with this *isnad*." [3](#)

Secondly, on the basis of that which has been said, the difference between the Imamiyyah and the Ahl al-Sunnah lies in the chains and channels of transmission of the Sunnah and the *isnad* of hadith. The greater part of that which has been received by the Imamiyyah from the Noble Prophet as 'the Prophet's Sunnah' is through the means of the Infallible Imams who are the twelve successors of the Messenger of Allah appointed by God, and who are believed by all followers of Islam to have been greatly pious men worthy of utmost veneration and whom the Imamiyyah believe to have been infallible and secure from sin and error.

From the Shi'i viewpoint, as the era during which the Imams lived (i.e. until the occultation of the last of the Imams) lasted until the year 260 of Hijrah, the traditions of the Prophet (s) and his Sunnah were secure from error until the said year and the chains of fallible narrators pertain to the period intervening between us and the last of the Infallible ones.

However, from the Sunni viewpoint, the chains of fallible authorities begin right from the time of the demise of the Noble Prophet (s). In other words, from the Sunni viewpoint, the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam in respect of the exposition of the Shari`ah and the period of immunity of Divine teachings, precepts, laws and prescriptions [from error and interpolation arising from transmission through chains of fallible authorities] was 23 years (i.e. from the beginning of the Prophet's ministry until his demise), whereas from the Shi'i viewpoint it was in effect 273 years (i.e. from the beginning of the Prophet's ministry until the demise of the Eleventh Imam).

As a result, Islamic teachings, sciences and laws received in the Shi'i tradition from their infallible source are much greater in respect of quantity, and in respect of quality closer to the era of the Infallibles, whereas in the Sunni tradition the bulk of hadith transmitted and received is limited to the first 23 years with a much greater distance of time following it.

By the way, it becomes clear that according to Shi'i belief the Noble Prophet (s) expounded and transferred everything that is needed by mankind, including the teachings dealing with doctrine, law, and other matters, to his infallible successors (*khulafaa'*) and entrusted this knowledge to them. In accordance with certain traditions, including the statements made by the Noble Prophet in a sermon that he delivered during his last hajj, he expressly made the following statement repeatedly:

يا أيها الناس! والله ما مشن شيء يُقَرِّبُكم من النار و يباعدكم من الجنة إلا وقد نهيتكم عنه

O People! By God, there is nothing that brings you nearer to paradise and takes you farther from hell but that I have commanded it to you, and there is nothing that brings you closer to hell and takes you farther from paradise but that I have forbidden you from it.<sup>4</sup>

Such a claim [as the one made by the Shi'ah concerning the Imams] is not made by the scholars of the Ahl al-Sunnah, for if they were to make it, who would they consider worthy of such a station?

Thirdly; there are the problems of authenticity and of the reliability of transmission as well as the chains of authorities through which the Prophet's *ahadith* have been received. According to Shi'i belief, the problems of authentication and reliability of transmission did not arise until 260/872-3 due to the chain of infallible authorities provided by the Imams, a chain which has not been accepted by the Ahl al-Sunnah.

To explain, even if we suppose that their Imamate is not established, the authority of the statements of the Imams of the Prophet's family (*Ahl al-Bayt*) in narration of the Prophet's hadith and the necessity of reference to them for Divine laws and Qur'anic teachings and sciences is something which is certain in accordance with the verse:

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

***O people of the Family, God only wills to keep away all impurity from you and to purify you with a thorough purification. (33:33)***

And also in accordance with this famous statement of the Noble Prophet (s):

إِنِّي تَارِكٌ فِيكُمْ الثَّقَلَيْنِ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَ عَترَتِي أَهْلَ بَيْتِي، مَا إِنْ تَمَسَّكْتُمْ بِهِمَا لَنْ تَضَلُّوا

Verily, I am leaving behind two precious things among you: the Book of Allah and my kindred, my family  
As long as you hold on to them you will not be misguided. [5](#)

Hence both the Book of Allah and the Sunnah support the authority of the statements of the Imams of the Prophet's family, may Peace be upon them, and underline the necessity of referring to them in matters of law of doctrine. There is no doubt that there is a fundamental difference between them and others like Anas, `Ikrimah, and Abu Hurayrah, and their *ahadith* cannot be compared to any of those transmitted by others.

That is because falsehood is an impurity of the soul, and the spirit and the Qur'anic verse mentioned considers them to be free from any kind of impurity. Accordingly, the *mutawatir* "Tradition of *Thaqalayn*" too calls the entire Ummah to refer to them and to acquire the knowledge of Islamic sciences from them.

Fourthly, if anyone carefully studies the traditions received from the Noble Prophet (s), it would be clear to him that in the Shi'i tradition Sunnah—throughout the course of history and from the time of its inception to the present day—has never encountered the handicaps that it faced in the sunni tradition. That is because the transmission of Sunnah was faced for a long period with the problem created by the prohibition on its writing and oral tradition was the only means by which it was transmitted from one generation to the next.

After the demise of the Noble Prophet (s), the Second caliph, with the claim that `the Book of Allah is sufficient for us' (*kafana kitab Allah*), severely prohibited the writing of hadith and he had some of the Companions whipped for writing the traditions of the Prophet (s). This prohibition remained in force until the time of `Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, the Umayyad Caliph. The dangers and drawbacks of oral transmission are obvious and one can guess the extent to which it exposed hadith to the hazards of corruption, alteration and interpolation in respect of wording, form and content.

However, in the Shi'i tradition Sunnah had a different history. From the very beginning. in accordance with the Prophet's command:

قَيِّدُوا الْعِلْمَ بِالْكِتَابِ.

Record knowledge by putting it into writing, [6](#)

Ali ( `a) used to write down the Prophet's sayings and statements. As a result the Imams of the Prophet's family, may Peace be upon them, possessed a book from which they would narrate for their close disciples. The contents of that book were dictated by the Prophet (s) and written by Ali ( `a).<sup>7</sup> Aside from this, the Imams themselves would instruct their pupils and ordered them to write it down.

The Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt ( `a) also possessed another book which was dictated by Hadrat Zahra' (s) and written down by Imam Ali ( `a). It contained the teachings which Hadrat Zahra' (s) had received from the Prophet or knew from Divine inspiration.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, we find such statements as the following among the traditions of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt ( `a):

اكتبوا ما تسمعون، فإنكم سوف تحتاجون اليها

Write down whatever you hear, for you will need it in the near future.<sup>9</sup>

اكتبوا فإنكم لا تحفظون حتى تكتبوا

Write down, for certainly you will not preserve (what you have learned) unless you-write it down. <sup>10</sup>

Yunus ibn Abd al-Rahman says that he came across a book on the topic of inheritance (*fara'id*) whereupon he showed its contents to the Eighth Imam, Ali ibn Musa al-Rida ( `a), and he verified its authenticity. <sup>11</sup>

Similarly Amr ibn Mutatabbib says that he had the contents of “the Book of Zarof ibn Nasih” on the topic of compensations (*diyāt*) authenticated by Imam Sadiq ( `a). <sup>12</sup>

Hasan ibn al-Jahm-also narrates that he had the same book on *diyāt* authenticated by Imam Rida ( `a).<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the evidence cited above, this statement of the Noble Prophet (s) made in Masjid al-Khif:

نصّر الله عبداً سمع مقالتي فوعاها و حَفَظَها و بَلَّغَها مَنْ لَمْ يبلِّغْها

May God bless him who hears my statements, understands them, preserves (*hafizaha*) them and communicates them to those whom they have not reached. <sup>14</sup>

clearly points to the necessity of making written records of the Prophet's statements, because writing is the best means of preserving and recording (*hifz*). It is mentioned in a tradition that once Sufyan al-Thawri requested one of the pupils of Imam Sadiq ( `a) to take him into the Imam's presence. He obtained the Imam's permission, and Sufyan went to meet the Imam at the appointed time. After he

received the leave to enter, he asked for pen and ink and then said to the Imam, “Recite for me the sermon of the Messenger of Allah in the Masjid al-Khif.” The Hadrat said,

اكتب: بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. خطبة رسول الله في مسجد الخيف، فقال: نَصَّرَ اللهُ عَبْدًا سَمِعَ مَقَالَتِي فَوَعَاها و

...

Write, “In the Name of Allah, the All Beneficent, the Most Merciful. The Sermon of the Messenger of Allah in the Masjid al-Khif: Then he said: May Allah bless the servant who hears my statements, understands them, ... [15](#)

On this basis it must be said that Sunnah in the Shi'i tradition has from the very beginning been accompanied with all the aspects essential for its preservation, including writing. Such a thing cannot be said of the transmission of Sunnah in the Sunni tradition, excepting only a small part of it. Hence it is a well-known maxim among the Sunnis that:

كل حديث رواه الشافعي عن مالك عن نافع عن ابن عمر، فهو سلسلة ألذهب.

Every hadith narrated by al-Shafi'i, from Malik, from Nafi', from Ibn `Umar is a golden chain of authorities (*silsilat al-dhahab*).

However, Shi'i scholars regard every hadith originating from any of the Infallible Imams from Ali ( `a) up to our master al-Askari ( `a) as a golden chain of authorities (*silsilat al-dhahab*). Besides, during the interval between Shi'i scholars and the Infallible Imams there are narrators traditions transmitted by whom are regarded as possessing a 'golden chain' of transmission. Among them are Zurarah ibn Ryan, Muhammad ibn Muslim, Aban ibn 'Uthman, Muhammad ibn Abi `Umayr, Yunus ibn Abd al-Rahman and others.

On the basis of what has been said, it may be remarked that the real *ahl al-sunnah* (lit. 'the people of the Sunnah') are the Ja`fari Shi'is, not those who are named as such and who due to the problems arising from the inadequacies of the transmitted Sunnah were forced to take in resort in analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), *istihsan*, *istiqrā'*, and the like as sources of law parallel to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Nevertheless, to be fair, the scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah have put in a greater effort than the Shi`ah in the transmission and arrangement of hadith, and the same is true of the field of Qur'anic exegesis.

O Lord, we thank You for all Your plenteous bounties, including the bounty of access to the Sunnah which is the opener of the way to chaste and pure life (*hayat-e tayyibah*) and the blessing of enjoying the *wilayah* of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, may Peace be upon him, who are the guides that lead to God and the truth.

يا أهل بيت النبوة! ... عندكم ما نزلت به رسله و هبطت به ملائكته ... موالِي! ... بكم علمنا الله معالم ديننا و أصلح ما كان فسَد مِن دنيانا ... اللهم إنا نشكرك على أن عرفتنا نفسك و رسلك و خاتم رسلك و حججك و خاتم حججك، و ما ندري ما نشكر أجميل ما تنشر أم قبيح ما تتستر، أم عظيم ما أبليت و أوليت أم كثير ما منه نجيت و عافيت، و السلام عليكم و رحمة الله

O People of the Household! . . . With you is all that which the Divine apostles have brought hitherto and which has been brought down by the angels .... My Masters! . . . It was by your means that God has taught us the principles of our religion and (through you) He has set right such matters of our worldly existence as lay in ruin. . . [16](#)

O God, we thank You for the knowledge You have give us of Yourself, of Your apostles and the Seal of Your Messengers and Testaments (*hujaj*), and the Seal of Your Testaments, and we do not know whether we should thank You (more) for publishing good things about us or for concealing our weak points, for the greatness of Your bounties and. trials or for the many perils from which You have rescued and delivered us.

May Peace and. God's mercy be upon you.

- [1.](#) Al-Shaykh al-Saduq, 'Uyun akhbar a-Rida (a), vol. 2, p. 173; a1-Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 85, p. 257, hadith no. 3.
- [2.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 53, hadith no. 14; al-Hurr al-Amili, Wasa'il al-Shi ah, "abwab al-qada," bab 8, hadith no. 26.
- [3.](#) Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Amali, p. 42, hadith 10; Hilyat al-abrar, vol. 2, p. 95; al-Khara'ij wa al jara'ih, vol. 2, p. 893; Bihar al-anwar, vol. 2, p. 148, hadith no. 21.
- [4.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 74, hadith 2.
- [5.](#) Bihar al-anwar, vol. 36, p. 331, hadith 191.
- [6.](#) Al-Hakim, al-Mustadrak al-Sahihayn, vol. 1, p. 106; Awal al li'ali, vol. 1, p. 68; Munyat al-murid, p. 267; Kanz al-'ummal, vol. 10, p. 127; Bihar al-anwar, vol. 2. p. 151; in some narrations the wording is as follows:

قال رسول الله: قَبِدُوا العِلْمَ. قَلِّتُ و ما تَقْيِيده؟ قال: كتابه

The Messenger of Allah said: "Capture knowledge." I said, "What is its capturing?" He said, "Its writing down."

- [7.](#) Al-Safar, Basa'ir al-darajat, p. 129; al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 296.
- [8.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. p. 297.
- [9.](#) Ibid, p. 52, hadith 9.
- [10.](#) Ibid., p. 52, hadith 10.
- [11.](#) Ibid., vol. 7, p. 330, hadith 1.
- [12.](#) Ibid., vol. 7, p. 324, hadith 8.
- [13.](#) Ibid., hadith 9.
- [14.](#) Ibid., vol. 1, p. 403, hadith 1.
- [15.](#) Ibid., hadith 2.
- [16.](#) Ibid.

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