

## *Hadith and the Sunnah of Muhammad – The Second Divine Revelation*

After the Quran, the second most important body of sacred literature in Islam is the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, also known as the Sunnah (tradition or way).

### *The Meaning of the terms Sunnah and Hadith*

The term *Sunnah* means tradition or way, and thus the Sunnah of Muhammad is generally understood to represent the statements, actions and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. The term *Hadith* on the other hand refers more specifically to the verbal and written reports collected that actually describe the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus the hadith are narrations that when looked at as a whole can be described as the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad.

### *The Difference between the Quran and Hadith*

Whereas the Quran is literally the spoken word of Allah, the hadith represents divine revelation expressed in the actions, statements, and approvals of the Messenger of Allah. The distinction between these two types of divine revelation has been explained by the famous Islamic scholar al-Suyuti in the following way:

The revealed speech of Allah is of two types:

As to the first type, Allah says to Gabriel: Tell the Prophet to whom I have sent you that Allah tells him to do such and such, and He then orders something. So Gabriel understands what His Lord has told him, then he descended with this command to the Prophet and tells him what His Lord has told him. But the expression is not worded exactly the same way, just as a may king say to his officer: “Go and tell so-and-so: ‘The king says to you: make every effort in his service and gather your army for fighting ...’, and when this messenger goes and says: “The king says to you: ‘do not fail in my service, and do not let the army break up, and send out the call for fighting ...’, then he has not lied nor shortened the message.

And in regards to the other type, Allah says to His angel Gabriel: “Read to the Prophet this document, and Gabriel descends with it from Allah, without altering it in the least, just as if the king writes a written command and hands it over to his trusted officer and says to him: “Read it to such-and-such person.” And so he reads it to him exactly as it is written without changing the wording in the least fashion.

The first example is that of the Hadith, or Sunnah; whereas the Qur’an is represented by the second parable. From this understanding, Muslims consider the reporting of the Hadith to be according to the meaning of the message, unlike the Qur’an which is always transmitted verbatim without even a change in one word.

Another important point that needs to be discussed at this point is the concept in Islamic literature of “technical” (shari’i) meanings of words that sometimes differ from the linguistic definition of the same word. The word “hadith” provides a good basis for understanding this concept.

Generally in the Arabic language, the word hadith means: news, report or narration. For example, someone could say that he has good “hadith” and this would be understood as good news. It is in this general linguistic sense that the word is used in the Qur’an. On the other hand, the word hadith also has a “technical”, or meaning more specific to Islam, that indicates specifically the reports concerning the ways of the Prophet Muhammad. Some people, neglecting the above understanding, will look into the Quran at a verse where Allah states, what is understood to mean:

**And We have sent down to you the best hadith (the Quran) [39:23]**

They will then say, well here Allah clearly states that the best hadith is the Quran itself, so why then do we need the reports of the Prophet to understand our religion? This lack of understanding of terminology has led to a small group of people today neglecting the hadith of the Prophet entirely. So, is there any basis from the Quran for collecting and adhering to the Prophet’s Sunnah? The answer to this important question is the topic of the next section.

#### *The Necessity of Following the Prophet’s Sunnah from the Quran and Hadith*

The Quran is actually replete with verses commanding all Muslims to obey the Prophet, as he is commanding them with nothing more than the command of their Lord. A few examples will be illustrated here where Allah states, what can be translated to mean:

**Whoever obeys the Messenger has indeed obeyed Allah. [4:80]**

**No, by your Lord they do not really believe until they submit to your (the Prophet’s) decision in all their disputes between them, and then do not find in themselves any opposition to your judgments, and that they completely submit to them. [4:65]**

**When a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger, it does not behoove a believer, man or woman, to have any further opinion in such a matter. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path. [33:36]**

**What the Messenger gives you, take it; and what he forbids you from doing, avoid doing it. [59:7]**

So reading through these selected verses it becomes hard to understand how one could reject the Prophet's Sunnah and try to "go it alone" with the Quran. The matter becomes even more irrational when you understand that the Quran provides more of a general outline to the religion, and only in limited areas does it include specifics.

For example, Allah commands the believers to establish their prayers in numerous parts of the Quran. Taken as a sum, one could reasonably understand from the verses of the Quran that there are five daily prayers, and that amongst other things, prayer includes standing, bowing, and prostrating the face to the ground. But how do all these elements come together and in what order? These details are not expanded upon in the Quran, but they are expounded upon heavily in the Sunnah where the Prophet instructs people in a step-by-step fashion, through hundreds of hadith, on how to pray.

So the hadith in numerous cases expounds upon the general guidelines provided in the Quran as the Prophet would always sit with his Companions (disciples) and explain to them how to understand the verses of the Quran.

The Prophet has stated: *"I leave behind me two things. You will never go astray if you hold fast to them: The Qur'an and my Sunnah."*

No doubt, the Messenger Muhammad even predicted that such a group would someday emerge, as can be seen from the following authentic hadith recorded by the famous hadith scholar Tirmithi and others:

The Prophet said, *"A time will soon come when of you (Muslims) will recline on his bed, and an order will come to him on an issue which I (the Prophet) commanded him to do, or not to do. To this, the man will reply, 'I don't know what you're talking about; what is found in the Book of Allah (Quran) is the only matter that we follow'. To this the Prophet stated, 'Surely, I am given the Qur'an and its example with it (the Sunnah)'."*

So, here the Prophet clearly states that the Sunnah is something equivalent to the Quran in that it also is a source of guidance and understanding for people who seek the Truth. Neither one stands alone, but they complement one another.

### ***Can Hadith be Trusted as Authentic?***

In recent times, criticism by some has been directed at the integrity and authenticity of the process of collecting hadith. Many false allegations have become widespread including the baseless idea that hadith were not recorded for one or two centuries after the death of the Prophet. This section will provide some of the factual details concerning the collection of hadith and the veracity of its related science in Islam.

In reality, the writing down of the Sunnah began *during* the lifetime of the Prophet by his own command. One authentic hadith that clearly illustrates this command is the following hadith:

Narrated Ibn Mas'ud that he heard the Messenger of Allah say, "May Allah bless the one who has heard my words and then memorized them until he conveyed them to another person. Perhaps the one that he conveys it to will understand it better than he does."

Other than from Ibn Mas'ud, this hadith has been narrated by twenty three other Companions and has been recorded in forty five different collections of hadith including Tirmithi, Ibn Maajah, al-Mishkaat and others. In fact, in his famous farewell sermon he is recorded to have said, "Those who are present here should convey this message to those who are absent." [Bukhari] Furthermore, there are other hadith which include the command to spread the words of the Prophet and warned of the severe punishment for those who intentionally twist his words. For example:

Narrated Abdullah ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of Allah said, "Convey to others my words, even it be just one verse ... but whoever falsely attributes something to me which I never said should expect his own seat in the Hellfire." [Bukhari]

Hence, with the above mentioned explicit order of the Prophet, many of the Companions were known to both memorize and write down his statements or hadith. In fact, it was common among the Prophet's Companions to memorize verbatim the Prophet's statements to not only benefit from them, but also to inform those who were absent about the Prophet's sayings and actions. Also, there are a number of authentic narrations demonstrating how some Companions ('Ali ibn Abu Talib, Ibn Mas'ud, and Abu Sa'id al-Khudri amongst others) advised the Muslims who came after them (the Successors) to memorize hadith, which they would then do either individually or in groups.

Close examination of hadith literature also shows how the Prophet used to teach his Companions through different educational styles and techniques such as repetition, questioning, dictation, and practical demonstration. After teaching them he would have them tell him what they had understood thus ensuring that the message was transferred clearly to them. Along with his Companions, deputations from outside were educated in both the Quran and the Sunnah as was the Christian delegation of Najran from Yemen, and the Prophet even had copies of his sermons sent to certain groups.

Additionally, the Prophet dictated letters that were sent out to the surrounding empires and peoples, some of which were very detailed and dealt with a wide range of legal matters. It can be safely said that there was a great deal of written instruction coming from the Prophet since it has been recorded that he had at least forty-five scribes during the twenty-three years that he was a Prophet.

Furthermore, some of the Companions were well known for their recording of every statement that they heard from the Prophet. Some of the more famous compilations were

those of the Companions Ali ibn Abi Taalib, Abdullah ibn 'Umar ibnul Khattab, Sa'd ibn `Ubâdah, Anas ibn Maalik and `Abdullah ibn `Amr ibn al-`Aas whose book of hadith is known as 'al-Sahîfah al-Sâdiqah' (the Trustworthy Record). A large number of Companions, including the greatest narrator among them – Abu Hurairah, thus had libraries of books which contained the statements of the Prophet.

In fact, it is authentically established that the Prophet gave some of his Companions the express permission to write down everything that he said. `Abdullah ibn `Amr ibn al-`Aas relates that he used to write down everything that he heard the Prophet say. Some members of the local Arab tribes censured him by saying, "Do you write down everything that you hear from Allah's Messenger while he is a man who speaks in happiness and anger?" `Abdullah ibn `Amr ibn al-`Aas then reported that he stopped writing the hadith and went to mention this matter to Allah's Messenger, upon which the Prophet told him: "Write. For I swear by him in whose hand is my soul, nothing comes out from this except the truth." And he pointed to his mouth. [Related by al-Hâkim and others]

Another authentic hadith that supports the above statement is from the narration of Anas ibn Maalik wherein he states that he heard the Prophet say, "Secure knowledge by writing it down." [Haakim]

Indeed, Allah summarizes this very point in the Quran when He says about the Prophet Muhammad: "***He does not speak of his own desire. It is only revelation that is revealed to him.***" (68:5)

The generation that came after the Companions, known as the Successors (Tabi'een), followed in footsteps of the Companions who were their direct teachers. They relied upon memorization and narration in addition to taking from the written works, and some of them also recorded portions of the Sunnah in writing. They initiated the process of seeking out those Companions who had memorized hadith from the Prophet in order to write them down.

Some of the more well known records from amongst the Successors includes those of Sa`eed ibn Jubayr, Mujahid bin Jabr (both students of the great Companion Ibn `Abbâs), Bashir bin Nuhaik who collected hadith from the hadith master of the Companions Abû Hurayra, Abu al-Zubayr Muhammad ibn Muslim ibn Tadrîs al-Makki the student of Jâbir ibn `Abd Allah, and Hishâm bin `Urwah ibn al-Zubayr. In fact, one such compilation is still available today and that is Sahifa Hamaam (the Record of Hamaam), wherein the Successor Hamaam bin Munabbî' transcribed directly from his teacher Abu Hurairah. In fact, researchers have proven that at least forty nine of the first generation Successors documented hadith in book form. These are the second source, after the records of the Companions themselves, for what was collected afterwards.

It was not until the beginning of the second century of the Islamic Era though that the comprehensive recording of Hadith was started on a large scale. This was done in part out of fear that the Sunnah could be lost as the Companions had spread throughout the

rapidly expanding Muslim Empire and their knowledge was being decentralized in contrast to when the majority of them lived nearer to the city Madinah. The first people to do this were the famous Hadith scholars Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Hazm (died 109 years after the Prophet or 120 AH) and Muhammad Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (died 113 years after the prophet or 124 AH). These scholars then inspired others, like the great scholar Malik ibn Anas who is famous for his hadith collection the Muwatta (which is still used and read today), to also thoroughly collect all of the Sunnah of the Prophet.

These early scholars worked diligently to create a system whereby no fabricated or flawed hadith would enter into the body of literature they were preserving. Amongst the earliest and most precise methods of preservation was the practice of a teacher reading to their students from the student's book, which was either a complete or partial copy of the teacher's book. Students and scholars would test their teacher's knowledge by inserting hadith throughout the book before giving it to their teacher for reading. Teachers who didn't recognize the additions were "denounced and declared untrustworthy" (Azami 17).

As time went on, students would read back what they had learned to their teachers, in the presence of other students with the same information thus allowing for anyone with mistakes to fix them and also so that the students present could also correct another student as necessary. Also, after a hadith book had been read in its entirety before a hadith scholar, the scholar would certify the student's copy by signing it, and the student was then allowed only to transmit the hadith reports recorded in that certified copy.

On the other hand, proof of direct verbal transmission was also absolutely necessary to guarantee that the student had learned the hadith correctly, as merely writing a hadith did not guarantee its exact transmission (due to the complexity of vowelization in the Arabic language which could have an effect on the meaning if not pronounced correctly). In many (but not all) cases, the student would have to memorize the hadith before it would be accepted from him by his teacher.

This process of hadith collection and verification continued with increased strength and success until it reached its pinnacle approximately one hundred years later in the work of the hadith master al-Bukhari, who died in 256 AH (245 years after the Prophet died). His collection of hadith, Saheeh al-Bukhari (the Authentic Collection of Bukhari), would soon become the most famous collection of hadith in all of Islamic history, being regarded ever since its publication as second only to the Quran in authenticity and integrity. It took him sixteen years to write this book, which Muslim scholars unanimously agreed is authentic and without any errors.

Many people falsely think that Bukhari went about and collected many of these narrations himself from scratch whereas in reality he depended upon the precise efforts of the eminent scholars before him as source work for his collection. It is known that he examined over 300,000 hadith reports and gathered from them approximately 3500 for his collection which met only the most stringent requirements. Bukhari only accepted narrations from the most trustworthy Muslim scholars who had attained the highest degrees of memorization, precision, excellent character and trustworthiness, and who in

turn had narrated from equally reliable scholars, all the way back to the Companions themselves who narrated directly from the Messenger of Allah.

Bukhari himself underwent very stringent testing before his book was accepted by other scholars and students of Islamic knowledge around the Muslim Empire. To give the reader a glimpse of this man's incredible memory, one of the "tests" that he underwent shall briefly be illustrated for you.

It has been authentically recorded in the history books how when Bukhari arrived in Iraq he was met by ten scholars who requested permission to test his memory of hadith in order to gather an idea into the integrity and precision of his work. Each of the ten scholars chose ten hadith but then intentionally mixed up the text of each hadith with the chain of narrators (those who reported the hadith in order from the Prophet) who reported it. After narrating all of these correct texts with mixed chains to Bukhari they asked him to grade the hadith.

He responded by telling them that all of the hadith they had just recited to him were wrong. He then astonished both the scholars in attendance and the crowd that had gathered by matching each text with its correct chain of narrators after repeating back to the scholars the incorrect test version they had mentioned to him, thus repeating back to them one hundred falsified narrations and the corrected one hundred authentic narrations all from memory and without a single page before him!

Those who have studied recent methods employed in the West for recording history will indeed find that there are a great many similarities with the methods used for collecting and verifying hadith. In fact, the process of hadith collection has many unique factors that unbiased students would agree gives it a clear edge over other more contemporary methods of knowledge preservation. Recent archaeological findings of some of the earliest hadith collections, including some from the first Islamic century, have furthermore demonstrated the complete accuracy and integrity of this process as when these early texts were compared with modern collections, they showed no differences.

### ***A Sampling of Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ...***

#### *On Allah's Immense Mercy and Forgiveness*

1. Anas reported: Messenger of Allah said, "***Allah, the Exalted, has said: `O son of Adam, no matter what sins you have committed, I will forgive you as long as you pray to Me and hope for My forgiveness. O son of Adam, I do not care if your sins are so many that they reach the sky, for if you would then ask for My forgiveness, I would surely forgive you. O son of Adam, if you come to Me with an earth-load of sins and meet Me associating no partners with Me, I would match your sins with an equal amount of forgiveness.***" [Tirmidhi]

2. Abu Hurairah reported: I heard Messenger of Allah saying, "*When Allah created the creatures, He wrote in the Book, which is with Him over His Throne: `Verily, My Mercy prevails over My Wrath.`*" [Bukhari and Muslim]
3. Abu Hurairah reported: I heard the Messenger of Allah say, "*Allah created one hundred units of mercy on the Day He created the heavens and the earth. Each one of them can contain all that is between the Heaven and the Earth. Of them, he put one on earth, through which a mother has compassion for her children and animals and birds have compassion for one another. On the Day of Resurrection, He will perfect and complete His Mercy.*" (That is He will use all the hundred units of mercy for His servants on that Day). [Bukhari and Muslim]
4. Ibn `Umar reported: I heard Messenger of Allah saying, "*A believer will be brought close to his Lord on the Day of Resurrection and enveloping him in His Mercy, He will make him confess his sins by saying: `Do you remember (doing) this sin and this sin?` He will reply: `My Lord, I remember.` Then He will say: `I covered it up for you in the life of world, and I forgive it for you today.` Then the record of his good deeds will be handed to him*". [Bukhari and Muslim]
5. Ibn `Abbas said: The Messenger of Allah said, "*If anyone constantly seeks forgiveness from Allah, Allah will appoint for him a way out of every distress, provide him relief from every anxiety, and will provide sustenance for him from where he didn't expect it.*" [Abu Dawud]

#### *On the Relationship between Faith and Brotherhood*

6. Anas ibn Malik reports that the Prophet said, "No one amongst you truly believes until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself. [Muslim]

#### *On Concealing the Faults of Others*

7. Abu Hurairah reported: The Prophet said, "*Allah will cover up on the Day of Resurrection the defects (faults) of the one who covers up the faults of the others in this world.*" [Muslim]

#### *On the Prohibition against Oppression*

8. Jabir bin `Abdullah reported: Messenger of Allah said, "*Beware of injustice, for oppression will be darkness on the Day of Resurrection; and beware of stinginess because it doomed those who were before you. It incited them to shed blood and treat the unlawful as lawful.*" [Muslim]

### *On Kindness to Widows and the Poor*

9. Abu Hurairah reported: The Prophet said, "*One who strives to help the widows and the poor is like the one who fights in the way of Allah.*" *The narrator said: I think that he added also: "I shall regard him as the one who stands up (for prayer) without rest and as the one who observes fasts continuously".* [Bukhari and Muslim]

### *On Kindness to the Neighbor and Hospitality*

10. Abu Shuraih Al-Khuza`i reported: The Prophet said, "*He who believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him be kind to his neighbor; and he who believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him show hospitality to his guest; and he who believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him either speak good or remain silent.*" [Muslim]

### *On Kindness, Love and Obedience to Parents*

11. Abu Hurairah reported: The Prophet said, "*May he be disgraced! May he be disgraced! May he be disgraced, the one whose parents, one or both, attain old age during his life time and he does not enter Paradise (by being dutiful to them).*" [Muslim]

### *On Having Good Expectations from Allah*

12. Jabir bin `Abdullah reported: I heard the Prophet saying three days before his death: "*Let none of you die unless he has good expectations from Allah.*" [Muslim]

### *On Kindness in Business Dealings and in Regards to Loans*

13. Jabir reported: The Messenger of Allah said, "*May Allah's Mercy be upon a man who adopts a kind and easy attitude when he sells and buys, and when he demands repayment of loans he gave out.*" [Bukhari]
14. Abu Mas`ud al-Badri reported: The Messenger of Allah said, "*A person from amongst the people who lived before you was called to account by Allah on the Day of Resurrection. No exceptional good deeds were found in his credit except that he, being a rich man, had financial dealings with people and had commanded his servants to show leniency to those who were having difficulty repaying their loans. Upon this **Allah the Exalted and Majestic said:** `I am more entitled to this characteristic (of leniency), so waive this man's sins.'" [Muslim]*

### *On the Excellence of the Attitude of the Believer*

15. On the authority of Suhayb who narrates: The Messenger of Allah said: “*How wonderful is the attitude of the believer, for his attitude is always good, and this applies to no one except the believer. If something good happens to him, he gives thanks and that is good for him, and if something bad happens to him, he bears it with patience, and that is good for him.*” [Muslim]

### *On the Excellence of Setting Slaves Free*

16. Abu Hurairah reported: The Messenger of Allah said, “*Whoever sets free a believing slave, Allah will deliver from the fire of Hell every limb of his body in return for every limb of the slave's body ....*” [Bukhari and Muslim]

### *On the Excellence of Knowledge*

17. Abu Hurairah reported: The Messenger of Allah said, “*Allah makes the way to Paradise easy for the one who treads a path in search of knowledge.*” [Muslim]

### *On the Different Forms of Jihad*

18. The Prophet Muhammad said: “*The most excellent type of Jihad is speaking the truth in the presence of a tyrannical ruler.*” [Abu Dawud, Tirmithi and Ibn Majah]
19. The Prophet Muhammad said: “*The most excellent type of Jihad is to battle against your own self and its desires for the sake of Allah.*” [Tirmithi]

### *On those who will be Shaded in the Shade of Allah*

20. It was reported from Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet said: “*There are seven whom Allah will shade with His shade on the day when there will be no shade except His (the Day of Judgment): 1) the just ruler; 2) a young person who grew up worshipping their Lord; 3) a person whose heart is attached to the mosque; 4) two people who love one another for the sake of Allah and meet and part on that basis; 5) a man who is called by a woman of high status and beauty and yet resists her while saying ‘I fear Allah’; 6) the one who gives in charity and conceals it to such an extent that his left hand does not know what his right hand gives; 7) and those one who remember Allah when alone to such an extent that their eyes well up with tears.*” [Bukhari and Muslim and others]

### *On the Reward of those who Lose a Child*

21. Abu Sinan said: I buried my son Sinan and Abu Talhah al-Khulaani was sitting at the graveside. When I wanted to leave, he took my hand and said, "Shall I not give you some glad tidings, O Abu Sinan?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Al-Dahhaak ibn 'Abd al-Rahmaan ibn 'Arzab narrated to me from Abu Moosa al-Ash'ari that the Messenger of Allah said: "*When someone's child dies, Allah says to His angels, 'You have taken the child of My slave.' They say, 'Yes.' He says, 'You have taken the apple of his eye.' They say, 'Yes.' He says, 'What did My slave say?' They say, 'He praised you and said "Innaa lillaahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'oon (Verily to Allah we belong and unto Him is our return).'* Allah says, '*Then build for My slave a house in Paradise and call it the house of praise.*" [Tirmidhi]

### *On Bearing Trials with Patience*

22. The Messenger of Allah said: "*The greatest reward comes with the greatest trial. When Allah loves a people He tests them. Whoever accepts that wins His pleasure but whoever is discontent with that earns His wrath.*" [Tirmidhi and Ibn Maajah]

### *On Kindness to Animals*

23. Abu Hurairah reported: Messenger of Allah said, "*While a man was walking on his way he became extremely thirsty. He found a well and went down into it to drink water. Upon leaving it, he saw a dog which was panting out of thirst. His tongue was lolling out and he was eating moist earth due to his extreme thirst. The man thought to himself, 'This dog is extremely thirsty as I was.'* So he descended back into the well, filled up his leather sock with water, and holding it in his teeth, climbed up and quenched the thirst of the dog. Allah was pleased by this man's action and forgave him his sins". The Companions then asked the Prophet: "Shall we be rewarded for showing kindness to the animals also?" He said, "A reward is given in connection with kindness to every living thing". [Bukhari and Muslim]

### *On the Punishment Associated with Cruelty to Animals*

24. Narrated 'Abdullah bin 'Umar: Allah's Messenger said, "A woman was tortured and was put in Hell because of a cat which she kept locked in her home till it died of hunger." Allah's Messenger then said, "**Allah said to this woman,** 'when you locked it up You neither fed it nor gave it water, nor did you set it free to eat the insects of the earth.'" [Bukhari]

As a brief commentary to these last two hadith narrations that are concerned with kindness to animals, Allah has said about the Prophet in the Quran:

*And we have not sent you [Muhammad] except as a Mercy to the Universe*  
[22:107]

This verse should be remembered when examining the multitude of hadith wherein the Prophet commands respect and kindness to humans (both Muslim and non-Muslim), animals, and even the environment for indeed where it not for the sending of Muhammad much of the world would have suffered greatly from the greed and carelessness sometimes inherent in humanity.