

Preservation of Sunnah (part 1 of 4)

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

Divine preservation of Sunnah and the first stage in the collection of Hadeeth.

After the Qur'aan, Sunnah or Hadeeth is the second source from which the teachings and laws of Islaam are drawn. The Sunnah details all aspects of a Muslim's life including prayer, fasting, Hajj, zakaah, marriage, divorce, child custody, war, and peace. Someone who embraced Islaam then, just as today, is in need of Qur'aan and Sunnah. Just as a Muslim is required to accept and follow the Qur'aan, a Muslim is bound to accept and act on the Hadeeth of the Prophet.

The following article is an introduction to the collection of Hadeeth. It does not cover all aspects of Hadeeth preservation. The emphasis is primarily to show Hadeeth were written and memorised from the time of the Prophet and to highlight some of the efforts of early Muslims in preserving and transmitting the teachings of the Prophet.

Divine Preservation of Sunnah

Allaah, the Exalted, says in the Qur'aan:

[“Indeed, it is We who sent down the reminder and indeed, We will be its guardian.”]¹

In this verse 'reminder' refers to everything Allaah revealed, both the Qur'aan and Sunnah. Allaah is promising to protect the Qur'aan and the Sunnah. And it makes sense. The Qur'aan is Allaah's final revelation and Prophet Muhammad is Allaah's final prophet. Allaah commands Muslims to follow the Sunnah in the Qur'aan as we have seen above. If the Sunnah were not preserved, Allaah would be ordering us to do something impossible: follow the Sunnah that either has not been preserved or doesn't exist! Since, this would contradict divine justice, Allaah must have preserved the Sunnah. As we will see in these articles, Allaah, through human beings used various means by which He preserved the Sunnah.

¹ Qur'aan [15:9]

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First stage in collection of Hadeeth

Transmission of Hadeeth during the Prophet's lifetime

The transmission of the practices and sayings of the Prophet from one person to another took place in written and oral form during his lifetime. In fact, the Prophet, may Allaah praise him, himself used to give instructions with regard to the transmission of what he taught. There is strong historical evidence that whenever a people embraced Islaam, the Prophet used to send to them one or more of his companions who not only taught them the Qur'aan, but also explained to them how the injunctions of the Book were carried out in practice, that is Sunnah.

When a deputation of the Rabi'a came to him in the early days of Madinah, the Prophet concluded his instructions to them with the words:

“Remember this and report it to those whom you have left behind.”²

He instructed in another case:

“Go back to your people and teach them these things.”³

It is also recorded that people would come to the Prophet and demand teachers who could teach them the Qur'aan and the Sunnah: **“Send us men to teach us the Qur'aan and the Sunnah.”⁴**

On the occasion of the pilgrimage, the Prophet after enjoining on the Muslims the duty of holding each other's life, property and honour sacred, added:

“He who is present here should carry this message to him who is absent.”⁵

Naturally, the companions of the Prophet were fully aware that his Sunnah was to be followed as the injunction to obey the Prophet in all matters was found in the Qur'aan as well. When Mu'adh ibn Jabal was appointed governor of Yemen by the Prophet, and was asked as to how he would judge cases, his reply was **“by the Book of Allaah.”** Asked again if he did not find a direction in the Book of God, he replied, **“by the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah.”⁶**

The Sunnah was therefore recognised as affording guidance in religious matters in the lifetime of the Prophet. He used to teach his Sunnah primarily in three ways:

² Mishkaat

³ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

⁴ Saheeh Muslim

⁵ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

⁶ Tirmidhee and Aboo Daawood

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(1) Verbal Teaching: The Prophet himself was the teacher of his Sunnah. To facilitate memorisation and understanding for his companions, he used to repeat important things thrice. After teaching his Companions he used to listen to what they had learnt. Visitors from other tribes were accommodated by the people of Madinah to instruct them in the Qur'aan and the Sunnah.

(2) Dictation to scribes: The Prophet is estimated to have 45 scribes who wrote for him extensively. He sent letters to kings, rulers, tribal leaders, and Muslim governors. Some of them contained legal matters like Zakaat, taxation, and forms of worship. The Prophet dictated to several companions like Alee ibn abee Taalib, Abdullah bin 'Amr bin al-Aas, and ordered that a copy of his farewell Khutbah be given to Aboo Shah from Yemen.

(3) Practical demonstration: The Prophet taught the method of ablution, prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage. In every matter of life, the Prophet gave practical lessons with clear instructions to follow his practice. He said, **'Pray as you see me pray'**, and **'learn from me the rituals of Hajj pilgrimage.'** He established schools, directed them to diffuse knowledge, urged them to teach and learn by telling them the rewards for the teachers and the students.

Likewise, the companions used all three methods of learning applied by the Prophet in teaching his Sunnah:

(a) Memorisation: The companions used to listen to every word of the Prophet with utmost attention. They learnt the Qur'aan and the Hadeeth from the Prophet in the mosque. When the Prophet went away for any reason, they started to recollect what they had learned. Anas bin Maalik, the servant of the Prophet, said:

"We sat with the Prophet, maybe sixty persons in number, and the Prophet taught them Hadeeth. Later on when he went out for any necessity, we used to memorise it amongst us, when we departed it was as if it was cultivated in our hearts."⁷

Since it was not possible for all of them to attend the study circles of the Prophet, the ones who were absent would learn from the ones who were present. Some of them came to an agreement with each other to attend the circle of the prophet in shifts, as Umar did with his neighbour. Sulait, one of the companions of the Prophet, was given some land by the Prophet. His habit was to stay there for some time, and then come back to Madinah to learn what the Prophet had taught in his absence. He used to be so embarrassed not to have attended the lessons of the prophet, that he requested the Prophet that the land be taken back from him as it prevented him from attending the study circles of the Prophet.⁸

⁷ Khateeb, al-Jami.

⁸ Aboo 'Ubaid, al-Amwal.

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(b) Recording: The Companions learned the Hadeeth by putting it in writing as well. The first example of the companions writing the Hadeeth of the Prophet is Sahifah of Hummam ibn Munabbih discussed in a subsequent article. The second example is As-Sahifah as-Sadiqah, a written compilation of several hundred Hadeeth that belonged to the Companion Abdullah bin 'Amr ibn Al-As. Abdullah said,

“I asked the Messenger of Allaah for permission to record what I heard from him and he permitted me and I recorded it.”⁹

Imaam Ahmad's Musnad has 626 Hadeeth from Abdullah. Bukhaaree singularly recorded 8 and Muslim recorded 20, 7 of which they have in common.

(c) Practicing: The Companions used to put into practice whatever they memorised or wrote. It is sufficient to note that Ibn Umar took eight years to learn Soorah al-Baqarah.

⁹ Ibn Sa'ad.