

Principles of Determining the Sunnah

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Principles of Determining the Sunnah

The First Principle

Only that thing can be a Sunnah which is religious by nature and status. The Qur'ān is absolutely clear that the prophets of Allah were sent to deliver His religion. In their prophetic capacity, the ambit of their thoughts and deeds was only that of religion. Everything besides this, was primarily of no concern to them. No doubt besides their prophetic capacity they were also Ibrāhīm Ibn Āzar, Musā Ibn 'Imrān. 'Isā Ibn Maryam and Muḥammad Ibn 'Abdullāh in their human capacity; however, in this human capacity, they never asked obedience from their followers. All their demands were confined to their prophetic capacity, and what was given to them in this capacity was religion, and thus it was only religion whose propagation they were liable to:

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He has enjoined on you the same religion which He enjoined on Noah, and which We have now revealed to you, which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, with the assertion: "Adhere to this religion [in your lives] and do not create any divisions in it." (42:13)

Consequently, it is known history that the Prophet (sws) used weapons like swords and arrows in wars, traveled on camels, constructed a mosque whose roof was made of palm trees, ate some foods which were customary in the Arab society and showed his like or dislike for them, wore a certain dress which was in vogue in Arabia and whose selection also had much to do

with his personal taste – however, none of these things can be termed Sunnah and neither can any man of learning regard them to be Sunnah. At one instance, the Prophet (sws) himself is reported to have said:

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I am also a human being. When I direct you about something which relates to your religion, take it from me and when I express my own opinion [about something which is outside this sphere] then my status in this regard is nothing more than that of a human being ... I had conjectured about something.¹ Do not hold me accountable for such things which are based on opinion and conjecture. However, if I say something on behalf of God, take it because I will never forge a lie on God ... You very well know about your worldly affairs. (*Muslim*, Nos: 2263, 2361, 3262)

The Second Principle

The Sunnah entirely relates to practical affairs of life. Belief, ideology, history, occasions of revelation (*sha'n al-nuzūl*) and other similar things do not fall in its sphere. In the Arabic language, Sunnah means “trodden path”. The way the Almighty dealt with peoples to whom messengers were sent by rewarding or punishing these people is called Sunnatullāh by the Qur’ān. Consequently, the word Sunnah cannot be applied to things such as faith, and nothing which relates to knowledge can be regarded as Sunnah. Its ambit is practical things and everything that does not fall in this ambit cannot be called Sunnah.

The Third Principle

The third principle is that even things which belong to the practical sphere cannot be regarded Sunnah if they are initiated

1. Reference is to pollination of palm trees.

by the Qur'ān. It is known that the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) had amputated the hands of thieves, flogged criminals of adultery, stoned to death people for sexual misconduct, fought with people who deliberately denied the truth – however all these acts cannot be termed Sunnah. All these are directives initiated by the Qur'ān, and the Prophet (sws) merely followed them. On the other hand, directives such as the prayer, fasting, *zakāh*, *ḥajj* and animal sacrifice are also mentioned in the Qur'ān which has also made some corrections in them; however, it becomes evident from the Qur'ān itself that these directives were initiated by Muḥammad (sws) himself once he had revived them as part of the religion of Abraham (sws) and given them religious sanction. Thus they must be regarded as Sunnah which the Qur'ān has ratified.

Thus, if something is originally based on the Qur'ān and the Prophet (sws) has merely explained it or followed it in exactly the same way he was directed to, then these words or acts of the Prophet (sws) will not be called Sunnah; they will be termed as the Prophet's explanation and exemplary manner in which he acted upon them. Only those things will be regarded as Sunnah which are originally based on the words, practices or tacit approvals of the Prophet (sws), and they cannot be regarded as following a directive of the Qur'ān or an explanation of a directive mentioned in it.

The Fourth Principle

A new Sunnah is not constituted by merely observing some Sunnah in an optional manner. We know that the Prophet (sws) while complying the directive: (He that does a virtue of his own will, (2:158)) of the Almighty offered optional prayers besides the obligatory ones, he fasted optionally besides the obligatory fasts of *Ramaḍān*, offered animal sacrifice at instances in which it was not obligatory; however, none of these optional acts of worship constitute a new Sunnah. The way the Prophet (sws) showed diligence in worshipping over and above what was required of him can definitely be termed as a good example that he set for his followers; however, it cannot be regarded as independent Sunan (plural of Sunnah).

Similar is the case of doing some deed of religion is its most

ultimate and perfect form. The *wuḍū* (ablution) and *ghusl* (bathing) of the Prophet (sws) are two very good examples that can be presented in this regard. The way the Prophet (sws) went about doing these does not constitute any independent or original deed that they may be regarded as another Sunnah. He has in fact tried to obey an original Sunnah in its most complete and perfect form. Hence they shall be regarded as the exemplary form in which he acted upon a Sunnah, and not regarded as independent Sunnah.

The Fifth Principle

Things which merely state some aspect of human nature cannot be regarded as Sunnah. Beasts having canine teeth, wild birds having claws and tamed donkeys have been prohibited by the Prophet (sws); however, this prohibition is only a delineation of human nature, which is averse to eating such things. Hence this prohibition cannot be termed as Sunnah. The prohibition of certain food items mentioned in the Qur'an (6:146 and 2:173) is a mere delineation of human nature. Man inherently knows that lions, tigers, elephants, eagles, crows, vultures, kites, scorpions and human flesh itself are not meant to be eaten. He is also well aware of the fact that horses and mules are a means of transportation and have no role in satisfying one's hunger. There are some other similar things also which have been mentioned in various narratives and should be understood thus, and not as independent Sunan.

The Sixth Principle

Those guidelines of the Prophet (sws) cannot be regarded as Sunnah the nature of which is fully sufficient to show that the Prophet (sws) never wanted to constitute them as Sunnah. One example of this are the utterances and supplications which are said in the *qa'dah*. It is evident from various narratives that the Prophet (sws) taught the *tashahhud* and the *darūd* to be recited in the *qa'dah*; however, it is also very clear from these narratives that neither did the Prophet (sws) initiate these supplications nor did he deem them as an essential part of the prayer. He in fact wanted to give people the option to either read these supplications which he taught them or read some others to invoke the Almighty. Thus the only thing that is Sunnah in this regard is that one must sit in the

qa'dah position in the second and last *rak'at* of a prayer; other than this, no other thing is Sunnah in this sphere.

The Seventh Principle

Just as the Qur'ān is not validated through *khabr-i wāḥid*, the Sunnah is also not validated through it. The Sunnah is an independent source of religion. The Prophet Muḥammad (sws) was liable to communicate it with great care and diligence in its original form and in a manner that would render it certain. It was not left to a person's choice to communicate it further as is the case of a *khabr-i wāḥid*. Consequently, the source of Sunnah is the consensus of the *ummah*, just as the source of the Qur'ān is the consensus of the *ummah*. Just as the Qur'ān has been transmitted to the *ummah* by the consensus and verbal perpetuation of the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws), the Sunnah is transmitted to the *ummah* by the their consensus and their practical perpetuation. Less than this extent of validation, the Qur'ān and Sunnah cannot be accepted; only the Ḥaḍīth, which depict the exemplary personality of the Prophet (sws) or which contain his explication are transmitted through lesser means of validation.

These are the seven principles of determining the Sunnah. If what has been transmitted to the *ummah* by the Prophet (sws) other than the Qur'ān is deliberated upon in the light of these principles, the Sunnah, like the Qur'ān, can be determined with absolute certainty.

(Translated from Ghāmiḍī's *Mizān* by Shehzad Saleem)