

The Authority of the *Sunnah*: Reflections on Modern Critique from a Qur'ānic Perspective

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Abstract

This article delves into the reasons behind the authority of the sunnah of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) as a primary source of Islamic law, while shedding light on modern critics challenging its meaning, authority, and authenticity. The exploration of the sunnah's status involves investigating the Prophet's position as portrayed in the Qur'ān and scrutinizing its historical authenticity through an examination of the relevant literature on Islamic learning. The analysis, aimed at elucidating the Prophet's status from a Qur'ānic perspective, is structured around various themes, expounding the meaning and significance of the sunnah within Islamic law.

Keywords

Islamic jurisprudence, authority, authenticity, *sunnah*, *ḥadīth*.

Introduction

Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) is reported to have said, “I have left behind two things; you will never go astray as long as you hold fast to them, i.e., the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*.”¹ This Prophetic tradition reveals the cornerstones of Islam in general and Islamic law in particular. The *sunnah* of the Prophet is generally regarded as the second source of Islamic law. However, unlike the Qur'ān, the *sunnah* has been treated by some scholars with suspicion throughout Islamic history.² It has been scrutinized both on the etymological and epistemological basis to determine whether it truly means the model behaviour of Prophet Muḥammad as defined by the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence. This article aims to explore the conceptual meaning of the *sunnah* and its authoritative status as a source of Islamic law. It seeks to establish the status of the *sunnah* by ascertaining the status of Prophet Muḥammad from the Qur'ān and addresses the critiques of modern critics accordingly.

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¹ Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwatt'* (Karachi: Qirtas Printers, 2002), ḥadīth 1601.

² Abū 'l-A'lā Maudūdī, *Sunnat kī Ā'inī Ḥaithiyat* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 2005), 16–26.

The Concept of the *Sunnah*

Literally, the word *sunnah* means a well-known path, but it is also used to imply normative practice or an established course of conduct.³ For example, the Qur'ān (33:62) mentions *sunnat al-Allāh*—referring to the established practice of God in the form of punishing those who spread nuisance and anarchy in society. As a concept, the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence define the *sunnah* as “all that has been related from Prophet Muḥammad in terms of his speech, action, or approval.”⁴ In this definition, “approval” is the translation of the Arabic word “*taqrīr*,” which involves cases where someone said something or acted in a particular manner, which came to the knowledge of Prophet Muḥammad and he remained silent without clear disapproval. This is also included in the *sunnah*.⁵ It could be said that such an understanding of the *sunnah*, as advocated by the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, can trace its roots back to the ground provided by the eminent Islamic jurist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī. He enfolds the concept of the *sunnah* in a Qur’ānic term *ḥikmah* and holds that it is the model behaviour of Prophet Muḥammad, which makes evident what God meant in His Book.⁶

The concept of the *sunnah*, as mentioned above, is generally regarded as a classical concept and understood to be the view of the majority of Muslim scholars. However, modern Islamic literature shows that such an understanding of the *sunnah* has been subject to strong criticism by modernist Muslim scholars and Western orientalists. Modernist Muslim scholars like Ghulam Ahmad Parwez (d. 1985), Fazlur Rehman (d. 1988), and Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (b. 1952) provide a very different understanding of the *sunnah*. Ghulam Ahmad Parwez, generally celebrated for his disparate understanding of the Qur’ān, holds the Qur’ān as the only source of Islamic law. Convinced of the idea of Qur’ānic self-sufficiency, Parwez levels a very strong critique of the meaning of the *sunnah* and its authoritative status in Islamic law. As an explanation to the “following of the Prophet” mentioned several times in the Qur’ān, he says that Prophet Muḥammad was followed or obeyed

³ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 47.

⁴ Mustafa As-Sibaee, *The Sunnah and Its Role in Islamic Legislation*, trans. Faisal Ibn Muhammad Shafeeq (Lahore: International Islamic Publication House, 2008), 73.

⁵ Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *The Authority of Sunnah* (Karachi: Idaratul Qur’an wal Uloomil Islamia, 2004), 6.

⁶ Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risālah fi Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, trans. Majid Khadduri (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society 1961), 109–12. Also see Ahmad Eldridge Cleaver, “The Authority of the Sunnah according to the Qur’ānic Text,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 30, no. 1 (2013): 48–72.

as a ruler or central authority; the Prophet established a state purely based on the Qur'ān—implementing Qur'ānic laws, without any change, and legislating sub-laws, according to the need of time, in the light of Qur'ānic principles and with the mutual consultation of Muslims. Thus, “following the Prophet” would mean establishing a governance system purely based on the Qur'ān as the Prophet did in his time, and then such a Qur'ān-based system would be the custodian of Islam, and its obedience will be “obedience to God and His Prophet.”⁷ He also argues that it was only the Qur'ān that was given to mankind in its pure and authentic form, and the same is not true for the *ḥadīth*, since Prophet Muḥammad never made any arrangement for the preservation of anything else other than the Qur'ān.⁸ Instead, he argues that the penning down of the *ḥadīth* was a conspiracy of non-Arabs against Islam to compromise the teachings of the Qur'ān and shows that hadithification was something done against the express will of Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions.⁹ Fazlur Rehman also puts a dissenting view on the classical understanding of the *sunnah*. He understands the *sunnah* as a normative ethical-religious behavioural system giving rise to normative practices.¹⁰ For him, the *sunnah*, as a concept, was inclusive of the Prophet's opinions and analogies, as well as the opinions of his Companions.¹¹ Thus, the *sunnah* was not something large in quantity and was not meant to be specific because “no two cases in practices are identical in their moral, psychological, or material settings.”¹² He furthers his case by arguing that the *sunnah* as a dynamic concept, historically changed, first associated with the ethical-behavioural norms of the Prophet and then, over time, attached itself to the consensus of the Muslim community, which was inclusive of *ijtihād*. He says that the hadithification of the *sunnah* made a container in the form of *ḥadīth* for the content of the *sunnah* and undid the original organic link between *sunnah*, *ijmā'*, and *ijtihād*.¹³ Ghamidi conceptualizes the *sunnah* as a tradition of Prophet Abraham's religion, which Prophet Muḥammad

⁷ Ghulam Ahmad Parwez and Muhammad Aslam Jairajpuri, *The Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, trans. Ejaz Rasool (Lahore: Talu-e-Islam Trust, 2016), 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–27.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rehman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1964), 1.

¹¹ Abdullah Saeed, “Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-legal Content of the Quran,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17–23.

instituted as part of the religion after reforming them.¹⁴ He says that the *sunnah* has reached the Muslims through the consensus of the Prophet's Companions and their perpetual recitation. For him, the *ḥadīth*, which records the words, deeds, and tacit approvals of Prophet Muḥammad, stands as a biographical and historical record of Prophet Muḥammad's life and does not add anything to the beliefs and practices of the religion.¹⁵

Western scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, David Samuel Margoliouth, and Joseph Schacht also discuss the concept of *sunnah*, its authenticity, and its authoritative status. Goldziher, advancing the work of Aloys Sprenger¹⁶ and William Muir,¹⁷ says, "The Islamic concept of Sunnah is a reversed statement of ancient Arabs' views."¹⁸ He opines that before the emergence of Islam, *sunnah* was a prevalent concept in Arab societies. For them, *sunnah* denoted the traditions of Arabs and the customs and habits of their ancestors. When Islam emerged, the content of the old concept and the meaning of the word changed. Now, to the followers of Prophet Muḥammad, *sunnah* means all that can be shown to have been the practices of Prophet Muḥammad. He claims that *ḥadīths* were falsely produced by the Umayyads and Abbasids after the demise of the Prophet for their political gains, and therefore, they are, on the whole, untrustworthy.¹⁹ Margoliouth, not disagreeing with Goldziher, holds that the *sunnah*, as a principle of law, actually meant the normative usage of the community, and only later acquired the restricted meaning of "the precedents set by the Prophet."²⁰ Schacht, influenced by the work of Goldziher and Margoliouth, confirms the conclusion of Margoliouth. Strongly disagreeing with al-Shāfi'ī's understanding of the *sunnah* as the model behaviour of Prophet Muḥammad, Schacht says that the *sunnah* is nothing more than a "precedent" or "way of life."²¹ He uses the term

¹⁴ Javed Ahmed Ghamdi, *Islam: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Shehzad Saleem (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2021), 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ Aloys Sprenger, *The Life of Muhammad: From Original Sources* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2009).

¹⁷ William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet: From Original Sources* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1861). Muir furthered the arguments of Sprenger on the development of *ḥadīth* and its status.

¹⁸ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, ed. S. M. Stern, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1890), 2:26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:145–64.

²⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Early Development of Mohammedanism: Lectures Delivered in the University of London* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), 65–98.

²¹ Joseph Schacht, *The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1979), 58.

“living traditions” for the concept of *sunnah* to show that it connects the ancient meaning of the *sunnah* to the generally agreed practices of the communities later—to prove that they are all inter-related and interchangeable to such an extent that they could not be isolated from one another.²² Schacht, after investigating the concept of the *sunnah* in the ancient schools, which, for him, was later replaced by the “*sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad,” arrives at the following conclusion:

The ancient schools of law shared the old concept of sunna or “living tradition” as the ideal practice of the community, expressed in the accepted doctrine of the school. It was not yet exclusively embodied in traditions from the Prophet, although the Iraqians had been the first to claim for it the authority of the Prophet, by calling it the “sunna of the Prophet.” The continuous development of doctrine in the ancient schools was outpaced by the development of traditions, particularly those from the Prophet, in the period before Shafi‘i, and the ancient schools were already on the defensive against the rising tide of traditions when Shafi‘i appeared. This contrast between doctrine and traditions gave Shafi‘i his opportunity; he identified the “sunna of the Prophet” with the contents of traditions from the Prophet to which he gave, not for the first time, but for the first time consistently, overriding authority, thereby cutting himself off from the continuous development of doctrine before him. If the “living tradition” diverges constantly from traditions, this shows that the traditions are, generally speaking, later.”²³

The Authority of the *Sunnah*

It has been witnessed that the *sunnah*, defined as the model behaviour of Prophet Muḥammad, has been strongly confronted by Muslim modernist scholars and Western orientalists. Such opposition has not only challenged the authoritative status of the *sunnah* but also proposed some persuasive alternative conceptions. However, to understand the concept of the *sunnah* and its authoritative status, it is imperative to delve into the nature of Islamic law and its self-evident components, and then determine the status of Prophet Muḥammad and his conduct within the framework.

An examination of the nature of Islamic law reveals that it is an amalgamation of reason and revelation. It argues that human reason, though a great gift from God, is insufficient on its own to determine the values of human life. In other words, human reason cannot provide human beings with a precise scale to distinguish what is good and what is bad in the short or long term, both in their material and spiritual affairs. Therefore, it requires divine guidance from the All-knowing God

²² Ibid., 59.

²³ Ibid., 57.

to fairly serve human beings.²⁴ In this context, for Muslims, the content of rationality is predetermined by the All-knowing God, Who has revealed it in a particular body of knowledge to Prophet Muḥammad in the form of the Qur'ān.

From this perspective, the Qur'ān, as a self-evident truth in Islam, serves as the primary point of reference for Muslims to understand what constitutes Islam. Hence, the meaning of the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad and its authoritative status can be ascertained by determining the status of Prophet Muḥammad within the Qur'ān.

The Status of Prophet Muḥammad: A Qur'ānic Imagery of the Prophet

The Qur'ān does not confine the prophetic role of Prophet Muḥammad to the conventional dictionary definition of a prophet, which typically characterizes a prophet as “a person who is believed to be chosen by God to say the things that God wants to tell people.”²⁵ Instead, the Qur'ān assigns Prophet Muḥammad a multifaceted role, encompassing his functions as the conveyer of the Qur'ān, its educator, its explicator, and its living exemplar. The Qur'ān concisely encapsulates these various facets of the Prophet's role when it states, “Indeed, Allah conferred a great favor on the believers when He sent among them a Messenger (Muḥammad) from among themselves, reciting unto them His Verses (the Qur'an), and purifying them (from sins by their following him), and instructing them (in) the Book and *Al-Hikmah*, while before that they had been in manifest error.”²⁶ Moreover, the same characteristics are attributed to the Prophet in the prayer of Prophet Abraham when the Qur'ān quotes his prayer, “Our Lord! Send amongst them a Messenger of their own, who shall recite unto them Your Verses and instruct them in the Book and *Al-Hikmah*, and purify them. Verily! You are the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.”²⁷

These Qur'ānic verses indicate that the Prophet's role was not limited to merely delivering the verses of the Qur'ān to the people and functioning as a mere messenger; instead, Prophet Muḥammad was tasked with not only reciting the Qur'ānic verses but also with instructing the “Book and *ḥikmah*” and guiding people towards spiritual

²⁴ Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic law* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14–16.

²⁵ Collins, s.v. “prophet,” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/prophet>, accessed September 15, 2023.

²⁶ Qur'ān 3:164. The translations of Qur'ānic verses cited throughout this article are of Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali, *The Noble Quran* (Medina: King Fahad Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, 2013).

²⁷ Qur'ān 2:129.

purification by training them to practically implement the teachings. Here, of particular significance is the term *ḥikmah* that follows the word Book in the aforementioned verses. *Ḥikmah* is interpreted as the act of “putting everything in its place at the right time.”²⁸ When read in conjunction with the Book, it signifies an interpretation and explanation of the Book that aligns with the divine intentions of its giver, God.²⁹ Therefore, one of the primary responsibilities of Prophet Muḥammad was to elucidate, through his exemplary conduct, the true meaning of God’s message as conveyed in His Book.

The Conduct of Prophet Muḥammad Inspired by Revelation

Regarding the conduct of Prophet Muḥammad, the majority of Muslim scholars hold the view that the Prophet’s conduct was either inspired by or confirmed through divine revelation. They believe that the revelations received by Prophet Muḥammad from God can be categorized into two types. The first is “the recited revelation,” which pertains to the kind of revelation that can be recited and is exclusively found within the verses of the Qur’ān, meticulously transcribed in its textual form. The second type of revelation is “the unrecited revelation,” which denotes the revelation received by Prophet Muḥammad that was not communicated verbally to the people but was manifested through the Prophet’s actions and behaviours. While this perspective represents the majority viewpoint, some scholars, such as Parwez and his teacher Aslam Jairājpūrī, do not subscribe to it.

Parwez, dissenting from the notion of differentiating between two kinds of revelation, asserts that Prophet Muḥammad received only one type of revelation, namely, the Qur’ān. He contends that neither the Qur’ān itself mentions two types of revelation nor is there any evidence of such a distinction in earlier Islamic scholarly literature. Parwez further strengthens his argument with a critical question: If the *sunnah*—the Prophet’s actions and sayings—is considered a revelation similar to the Qur’ān from God, and God has taken responsibility for safeguarding the revelation, then why is the *sunnah* not preserved in the same manner as the Qur’ān?³⁰

When Parwez’s narrative about the revelation is examined in the light of the Qur’ān, the Qur’ān does not approve of it. The Qur’ān discusses revelations in the following manner:

²⁸ Maḥmūd b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2010), comments on 2:129.

²⁹ Karam Shāh al-Azharī, *Tafsīr-i Ziyā’ al-Qur’ān* (Lahore: Zia-ul-Quran Publications, 2015), comments on 2:129.

³⁰ Parwez and Jairajpuri, *Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, 43–44.

It is not given to any human being that Allah should speak to him unless (it be) by Inspiration, or from behind a veil, or (that) He sends a Messenger to reveal what He wills by His Leave. Verily, He is Most High, Most Wise.³¹

This verse suggests that sending a Messenger, such as the angel Jibrīl, to convey God's message is not the sole method of communication between God and humans; alternative means of communication exist like inspiration and speaking of God from behind a veil. Moreover, the Qur'ān references various events not contained within its text but attributes them to divine origins, thus illustrating that revelation extends beyond the confines of the Qur'ān.³² An illustrative example from the Qur'ān serves to underscore this point: "We made the Qiblah (prayer direction towards Jerusalem) which you used to face, only to test those who followed the Messenger (Muhammad) from those who would turn on their heels (i.e., disobey the Messenger)."³³ After Prophet Muḥammad migrated to Medina, Muslims were initially directed to pray facing the direction of Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem). However, after seventeen months, this directive was abrogated by the Qur'ān, instructing Muslims to face the Ka'bah in Mecca during prayers, as stated in the following verse: "So turn your face in the direction of Al-Masjid-al-Haram (at Makkah)."³⁴ The change in prayer direction was met with questions from non-Muslims regarding why Jerusalem had initially been designated as the *qiblah*. The response to this objection is found in the aforementioned verse, which attributes the initial *qiblah* to God's decree, as it was designed to test people's adherence to Prophet Muḥammad. Notably, this directive is not explicitly stated in the Qur'ān; rather, it was conveyed to Muslims by Prophet Muḥammad without reference to a specific Qur'ānic verse. Nevertheless, the Qur'ān itself cites this alteration as a divine command. This example highlights the notion that revelation extends beyond the confines of the Qur'ān and that the words and actions of Prophet Muḥammad were also inspired by divine revelation from God.

Obedience to the Prophet

The above discussion on the status of Prophet Muḥammad in light of Qur'ānic verses implies that the Prophet, as a teacher and a guide from God, must be followed by Muslims. However, the Qur'ān, not leaving its believers at the mercy of inferences, also expressly mentions a large number of verses that make it mandatory for them to obey and follow

³¹ Qur'ān 42:51.

³² Maudūdī, *Sunnat kī Ā'inī Ḥaithiyat*, 105–11.

³³ Qur'ān 2:143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:144.

Prophet Muḥammad. An interesting point here is that the Qur’ān uses two different terms, i.e., *iṭā’ah* and *ittibā’* which mean “to obey” and “to follow,” respectively.

Regarding “obedience to the Prophet”—to obey what he says—the Qur’ān provides many verses insisting upon obedience to Prophet Muḥammad. For brevity, a few are quoted here to make the point clear:

Say (O Muhammad): “Obey Allah and the Messenger (Muhammad).” But if they turn away, then Allah does not like the disbelievers.³⁵

Say: “Obey Allah and obey the Messenger,” but if you turn away, he (Messenger Muhammad) is only responsible for the duty placed on him (i.e., to convey Allah’s Message) and you for that placed on you.³⁶

Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger (Muhammad); but if you turn away, then the duty of Our Messenger is only to convey (the Message) clearly.³⁷

Furthermore, the Qur’ān not only commands obedience to Prophet Muḥammad but also warns against disobeying him, as it says,

And whosoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad) and transgresses His limits, He will cast him into the Fire, to abide therein; and he shall have a disgraceful torment.³⁸

Know they not that whoever opposes and shows hostility to Allah and His Messenger, certainly for him will be the Fire of Hell to abide therein. That is the extreme disgrace.³⁹

Thus, the Qur’ān makes its argument clear regarding “obedience to Prophet Muḥammad” by covering both its positive and negative aspects. An eye-catching point in these verses is that “obedience to the Prophet” is always mentioned next to “obedience to God.” There is no verse in the Qur’ān where “obedience to God” has been mentioned alone with no reference to “obedience to the Prophet.”⁴⁰ However, we find some verses in the Qur’ān where “obedience to the Prophet” has been mentioned alone, with no reference to “obedience to God,” for example, “If you obey him, you shall be on the right guidance”⁴¹ and “Perform As-Salat (Iqamat-as-Salat), and give Zakat and obey the Messenger (Muhammad) that you may receive mercy.”⁴²

³⁵ Ibid., 3:32.

³⁶ Ibid., 24:54.

³⁷ Ibid., 64:12.

³⁸ Ibid., 4:14.

³⁹ Ibid., 9:63.

⁴⁰ Usmani, *Authority of Sunnah*, 15.

⁴¹ Qur’ān 24:54.

⁴² Ibid., 24:56.

A contextual study of the Qur'ān reveals the reason for so much emphasis on “obedience to the Prophet.” It shows that God does not address each individual to tell him what he is required to do. Instead, God sends a messenger who tells the people what He wills.⁴³ Thus, when there is a prophet from God, he represents God's will, and his obedience becomes obedience to God. Whatever he tells the people about God's commandments, he tells it in the capacity of a prophet, i.e., in the case of Prophet Muḥammad, Muḥammad, the Prophet of God, and not in his personal capacity, i.e., Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh.⁴⁴

Following the Prophet

Like “obedience to the Prophet,” the “following of the Prophet” is equally emphasized as obligatory in numerous Qur'ānic verses. For example, the Qur'ān states, “Say (O Muhammad to mankind): ‘If you truly love Allah, then follow me’”⁴⁵ and “Verily, among mankind, those who have the strongest claim to Ibrahim (Abraham) are those who followed him (Muhammad).”⁴⁶

The reason for this emphasis is evident. Prophet Muḥammad was not only meant to recite and teach Qur'ānic verses to the people; instead, he was also supposed to practically demonstrate what he taught and train people accordingly. Therefore, giving the actions of Prophet Muḥammad the same importance as his words is reasonable and justifiable; as mere theoretical education falls short in matters that primarily concern practical aspects. For example, merely reading law books does not make one a lawyer, and there's a reason why lawyering is referred to as “practice.” Similarly, watching war movies and reading war literature does not make one a soldier; rather, proper training in a military academy under the guidance of instructors is necessary.

The Time Limit of Prophetic Authority

The aforesaid have demonstrated that Qur'ānic verses establish the sayings and actions of Prophet Muḥammad as binding precedents for Muslims. However, the question that remains is whether the authority of the Prophet is confined to his own time or is an everlasting authority for all times to come. Proponents of the former notion, like Parwez and Ghamdi, argue that Prophetic authority was binding only on the people of his time and cannot be extended to all for all times to come. Parwez expressly states that when the Qur'ān commands to obey or follow

⁴³ Ibid., 42:5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 53:3–4.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3:31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3:68.

Prophet Muḥammad, it refers to his obedience in the capacity of a ruler or head of the state and not as a prophet. Thus, after the death of Prophet Muḥammad, whoever comes to rule Muslims must be obeyed and followed.⁴⁷ Ghamdi, while not explicitly stating it, suggests a similar idea by defining the *sunnah* as “Abrahamic traditions” and regarding the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet as historical literature.⁴⁸ This implies that, for him, the Prophet’s sayings and actions remain a part of history and not the source of religion and its law.

Regarding the issue of obeying the Prophet as a ruler, as suggested by Parwez, the Qur’ān does not endorse it. The Qur’ān clearly distinguishes obedience to the Prophet from obedience to those in authority. In this regard, the Qur’ān says, “O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger (Muhammad), and those of you (Muslims) who are in authority. (And) if you differ in anything amongst yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger.”⁴⁹ Here, obedience to the Messenger and those in authority is separate. Also, had the obedience to “authority” implied “obedience to God and His Messenger,” there would have been no need to mention them separately. This verse also indicates that Muslims may disagree with those in authority among them but cannot disagree with God and His Messenger. Additionally, whenever the Qur’ān directs obedience towards “Prophet Muḥammad,” it consistently refers to “obedience to the Messenger” and never to “obedience to the ruler” or obedience to “Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh.” This clearly shows that Prophet Muḥammad is to be obeyed as a Messenger, and obedience to him is not transferable to any ruler after him. Furthermore, concerning the time-specific nature of Prophetic authority, the Qur’ān leaves no doubt in extending it to all people for all times to come. The Qur’ān says,

Say (O Muhammad): “O mankind! Verily, I am sent to you all as the Messenger of Allah.”⁵⁰

And We have not sent you (O Muhammad) except as a giver of glad tidings and a warner to all mankind, but most of the men know not.⁵¹

And We have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for the ‘Alamin (mankind, jinns, and all that exists).⁵²

These verses of the Qur’ān are clear in stating that Prophet Muḥammad was sent for the entirety of mankind for all times to come

⁴⁷ Parwez and Jairajpuri, *Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, 57–59.

⁴⁸ Ghamdi, *Islam*, 17–19.

⁴⁹ Qur’ān, 4:59.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:158.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 34:28

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21:107.

and not exclusively for a particular group of people in his time. Further, the Qur'ān explicitly mentions that Prophet Muḥammad is the last Messenger and there shall be no prophet after him when it states, "Muhammad is not the father of any man among you, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the last (end) of the Prophets. And Allah is Ever All-Aware of everything."⁵³ Therefore, when it is established that the chain of prophets has concluded, and no prophet will come after Prophet Muḥammad, it becomes self-evident that the necessity of obedience to him extends to all the people for all times to come.

The Scope of Prophetic Authority

So far, in the light of Qur'ānic verses, it has been concluded that the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad stands as an authority for the Muslims. But to what extent does the *sunnah* stand as an authority is another important question. Like defining the status of Prophet Muḥammad, the Qur'ān also clearly defines the scope of Prophetic authority.

Prophet Muḥammad as Legislator

In many verses, the Qur'ān mentions Prophet Muḥammad as a legislator, demonstrating his delegated legislative powers from God, through which he can declare things lawful and unlawful for the people. The Qur'ān mentions, "He commands them for just and forbids them from evil; he allows them as lawful the pure and prohibits them as unlawful the impure."⁵⁴ This Qur'ānic verse is crucial in this context. By separating the Prophet's role of "bidding the just and forbidding the evil" from "making lawful the pure things and making unlawful the impure things," it indicates that the former relates to commanding and forbidding what has already been established as just and evil, respectively, while the latter pertains to declaring things lawful or unlawful. Thus, this verse signifies that Prophet Muḥammad has the authority to make things lawful and unlawful, other than those established as lawful or unlawful before. Further illustrating the authoritative status of Prophet Muḥammad in simpler words, the Qur'ān says, "And whatsoever the Messenger (Muhammad) gives you, take it, and whatsoever he forbids you, abstain (from it)."⁵⁵ As a commentary on this verse, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī quotes a very insightful dialogue between 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd, a Companion of the Prophet, and Umm Ya'qūb, a lady from Banū Asad. This shows how Prophet Muḥammad had prohibited things other than those mentioned in the Qur'ān. He narrates that a lady came to Ibn

⁵³ Ibid., 33:40.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7:157.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 59:7.

Mas'ūd and said, "I have come to know that you have cursed such and such ladies." He replied, "Why should I not curse these whom Allah's Messenger ﷺ has cursed and who are (cursed) in Allah's Book!" Umm Ya'qūb said, "I have read the whole Qur'ān, but I did not find in it what you say." He said, "Verily if you have read it (i.e., the Qur'ān), you have found it. Didn't you read: "And whatsoever the Messenger (Muḥammad ﷺ) gives you take it, and whatsoever he forbids you, you abstain (from it)... .?"⁵⁶

Prophet Muḥammad as a Judge

The Qur'ān also declares Prophet Muḥammad as a judge and makes his decisions binding upon Muslims. In this regard, the Qur'ān mentions:

Surely, We have sent down to you (O Muhammad) the Book (this Qur'an) in truth that you might judge between men by that which Allah has shown you.⁵⁷

The only saying of the faithful believers, when they are called to Allah (His Words, the Qur'an) and His Messenger, to judge between them, is that they say: "We hear and we obey." And such are the prosperous ones.⁵⁸

But no, by your Lord, they can have no Faith until they make you (O Muhammad) judge in all disputes between them, and find in themselves no resistance against your decisions, and accept (them) with full submission.⁵⁹

Although all these verses confirm that Prophet Muḥammad has the status of a judge for the Muslims and that his decisions are binding upon them, verse 65 of Sūrat al-Nisā' is of particular importance here. This verse shows that the judicial role of the Prophet was also part of his prophethood, as the verse denies the faith of those who do not make Prophet Muḥammad a judge between them in their disputes. This denial applies even when they submit but do not do so cordially. Judicial decisions bind parties and oblige them to act as per the decision of the court, whether willingly or unwillingly. However, nowhere does any legal system require this cordial submission to the decision of the court, as is required by this verse. This clearly distinguishes the Prophet from any other common judge.

⁵⁶ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-tafsīr, bāb "wa mā ātākum al-rasūl fa khudhūh." The translation is of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 6:340-41, ḥadīth 4886.

⁵⁷ Qur'ān 4:105.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24:51.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:65.

Prophet Muḥammad as a Teacher of the Qur'ān

Furthermore, the Qur'ān explicitly extends the authority of Prophet Muḥammad to teach, interpret, and explain the Qur'ān to the people so that they can understand and ponder upon it. The Qur'ān says, “And We have also sent down unto you (O Muhammad) the reminder and the advice (the Qur'an), that you may explain clearly to men what is sent down to them, and that they may give thought.”⁶⁰ The Qur'ān is in Arabic, and its first audience was the Arabs. Therefore, there was no need for a translator or anyone else to teach them the literal meaning of the Qur'ān. But entrusting Prophet Muḥammad with the task of explaining the Qur'ān implies that something in addition to the literal meaning of the Book was required. Furthermore, the Qur'ān says, “Then it is for Us (Allah) to make it (the Qur'an) clear to you.”⁶¹ This verse clearly shows that Prophet Muḥammad's explanation and interpretation of the Book came from God. So, his interpretation of the Qur'ān overrides all other possible interpretations and is final in this regard. One such interpretation and explanation of the Qur'ān could be seen in the context of Muslim family law. We know that the Qur'ān mentions a list of women that one is prohibited to marry, including the prohibition of marrying two sisters at one time. The Qur'ān says, “(Forbidden to you) two sisters in wedlock at the same time.”⁶² Prophet Muḥammad, while explaining this verse, said, “A woman and her paternal aunt (her father's sister) should not be married to the same man, and similarly, a woman and her maternal aunt (her mother's sister) should not be married to the same man.”⁶³ Thus, Prophet Muḥammad extended the scope of the verse to include paternal aunt and maternal aunt while explaining it. Similarly, in the law of inheritance, verses 11 and 12 of Sūrat al-Nisā' give a list of the heirs of a deceased and the way inheritance is to be distributed. The Qur'ān does not speak of inheritance to be based on one's religious faith. However, Prophet Muḥammad declared that “a Muslim cannot be the heir of a disbeliever, nor can a disbeliever be the heir of a Muslim.”⁶⁴

In light of the aforesaid, the Qur'ān clearly defines the scope of Prophetic authority. It requires Muslims to cordially submit to the laws,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16:44.

⁶¹ Ibid., 75:19.

⁶² Ibid., 4:23.

⁶³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb lā tunkaḥ al-mar'ah 'alā 'ammatihā. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:44, ḥadīth 5109.

⁶⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-farā'iq, bāb lā yarith al-Muslim al-kāfir. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:399-400, ḥadīth 6764.

decisions, and interpretations of the Qur'ān made by the Prophet. Such a broad scope of Prophetic authority defined by the Qur'ān not only fits properly in the overall structure of Islam but also makes it easier to understand its essence. It shows that Islam, unlike other religions, does not only deal with worship and religious rituals; instead, it provides a complete way of life. It extends itself to social, political, and economic issues. Therefore, the Prophet's rulings also extend to worldly affairs.

Preservation of the *Sunnah*: Controversies and Misconceptions

Another issue related to the *sunnah* and its authoritative status pertains to the historical authenticity of the *sunnah*. Among orientalists, scholars like Goldziher and Schacht, and among Muslim scholars, Parwez and Jairājpurī have suggested that the work done to preserve the *sunnah*, particularly the writing and compilation of Prophetic traditions, is unreliable. Consequently, they argue that Prophetic traditions cannot be considered a credible source for Islamic law. Their observations on the subject can be summarized as follows:

1. Most *ḥadīth* literature is based on oral traditions that were transmitted orally for more than a century.⁶⁵
2. The number of reported Prophetic traditions in the early collections of Islamic literature is relatively small. However, in later periods, this number increased significantly, and in the later collections, an unimaginable quantity was collected as compared to the early period.⁶⁶
3. The number of Prophetic traditions reported by younger Companions is much higher than those reported by older Companions, raising questions about the reliability of the former.⁶⁷
4. The method of *isnād* (chain of narrators) was introduced at the end of the first century AH, but it does not necessarily guarantee the authenticity of Prophetic traditions reported with the same *isnāds*.⁶⁸
5. Many Prophetic traditions often contradict each other.⁶⁹
6. Muslim critics have primarily focused on the *isnād* while neglecting critical examination of the texts of Prophetic traditions.⁷⁰
7. There is definite evidence that many *isnāds* and texts of Prophetic traditions have been fabricated.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Parwez and Jairajpuri, *Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96–100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Schacht, *Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 40–57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 145–64.

Although the aforementioned are groundbreaking assertions, it would be apt to say that the statement in point seven serves as the core of all the other criticisms. This is because all these criticisms ultimately lead to the idea that the *sunnah* is not necessarily the conduct of Prophet Muḥammad and that *ḥadīths* were produced after the Prophet, falsely attributing things to him. Undoubtedly, in the field of Islamic studies, no other area has seen as much forgery as in the *ḥadīth*. There is a bulk of literature dedicated to fabricated *ḥadīths*, bearing witness to extensive forgery in this domain.⁷² However, using *ḥadīth* fabrication as a reason to reject all *ḥadīth* literature is hardly valid. It is akin to rejecting the value of currency simply because counterfeit currency exists in the market. When these observations are subject to investigation and contextual analysis in the light of Islamic history, it becomes apparent that they are based on several misconceptions. To understand the preservation of the *sunnah* correctly, it is essential to unlearn the notion that something not written down is not preserved. Instead, it has to be acknowledged that, apart from the writing of *ḥadīth*, other crucial mechanisms were involved in the preservation of the *sunnah*.

Different Ways of the Preservation of the Sunnah

Before discussing the various methods employed for the preservation of the *sunnah*, it is essential to acknowledge that the observation of Prophet Muḥammad by his Companions—listening to his sayings and observing his actions—cannot be compared to an ordinary person inadvertently hearing or seeing something and sharing it without due diligence. This is because the Companions while observing or listening to the Prophet had at least four crucial considerations in mind. Firstly, Prophet Muḥammad is the final Messenger, and no prophet is to come after him.⁷³ Secondly, the body of knowledge that God was to bestow upon humanity for their guidance has been fully conveyed in the form of Islam through the Prophet.⁷⁴ Thirdly, as the followers of Prophet Muḥammad, they were obligated to pass on what they had received from the Prophet to the rest of humanity.⁷⁵ Finally, when transmitting Islam to others, they had to be extremely cautious because attributing any falsehood to God and His Messenger would have severe consequences for them, both in this life and the hereafter.⁷⁶ Consequently, the Companions of Prophet

⁷² Israr Ahmed Khan, *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria* (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 1–28.

⁷³ Qur'ān 33:40.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:143.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:144.

Muḥammad listened to and observed the Prophet with a sense of duty and a strong sense of religious obligation to actively learn from the Prophet and convey it as received, with great care. Therefore, what the Companions have conveyed from Prophet Muḥammad cannot be considered accidental learning experiences. With this context, it will be prudent now to discuss the different methods employed for the preservation of the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad.

Memorization

One of the most prominent characteristics of the Arab people at the time of Prophet Muḥammad was their exceptional memories. They had such strong memories that almost every one of them knew by heart not only their detailed lineages but also those of their animals. They were more confident in relying on memory than on writing. Some poets considered writing poetry a sign of defective memory. They believed that writing can be tampered with, but memory cannot be.⁷⁷ Ḥammād, a famous Arab poet, is reported to know by heart about one hundred long poems for each letter of the alphabet—which means he knew approximately twenty-eight hundred poems.⁷⁸ Thus, after the emergence of Islam in the Arab world, the Companions of Prophet Muḥammad utilized their mental abilities for the preservation of the Qur’ān and the sayings and conduct of Prophet Muḥammad. They stayed committed to the saying of the Prophet Muḥammad, “May Allāh bless a man who hears a *Ḥadīth* from us and memorizes it so that he can convey it to others.”⁷⁹ The Companions of the Prophet were eager to listen to him, and they used to devote a considerable amount of time to learning his sayings by heart. For example, we have the case of Aṣḥāb al-Ṣuffah. These were the Companions of the Prophet who dedicated their lives to Islam. They left their homes and began to live in the Prophets’s mosque so that they could learn the Qur’ān and the sayings of the Prophet directly from him.⁸⁰ Among these Companions of the Prophet is Abū Hurayrah, who has reported approximately 5374 Prophetic traditions. He says,

I have divided my night into three parts. In one-third of the night, I perform prayers; in one-third, I sleep; and in one-third, I memorize the sayings of Prophet Muḥammad.⁸¹

⁷⁷ ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 2010), 6:611.

⁷⁸ Khayr al-Dīn al-Zarkalī, *al-I’lām* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li ’l-Malāyīn, 2007), 2:131.

⁷⁹ Abū Dawūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash’ath, *Sunan*, kitāb al-‘ilm, bāb faḍl nashr al-‘ilm. The translation is of *Sunan Abu Dawud*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam Publications, 2008), 4:216, ḥadīth 3660.

⁸⁰ ‘Āshiq Ilāhī, *Aṣḥāb-i Ṣuffah* (Lahore: Azeem Books, 2001), 5–7.

⁸¹ ‘Abd Allāh Dārimī, *Sanan-i Dārimī* (Lahore: Shabeer Brothers, 2018), 1:76.

Discussion

Alongside the memorization of the *sunnah* of the Prophet, the Companions used to discuss with each other what they had learned from the Prophet. They considered themselves under an obligation to comply with the Prophet's following sayings:

It is incumbent upon those who are present to convey it (this information) to those who are absent because the informed one might comprehend it (what I have said) better than the present audience who will convey it to him.⁸²

A Muslim cannot offer his brother a better benefit than transmitting a good *ḥadīth* which has reached him.⁸³

These discussions of the Prophet's *sunnah* have played a very significant role in its preservation. It enabled the dissemination of the message of the Prophet amongst the people, and *sunnahs*, known to only some Companions, were conveyed to others.

Practice

Furthermore, the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad was preserved through its practice by the Companions. As mentioned earlier, one of the Prophet's duties was to make his people follow what he had taught them. Hence, Prophet Muḥammad embedded his *sunnah* in the daily routine works of his Companions. Borrowing Schacht's phrase of "living traditions,"⁸⁴ it could be said that Prophet Muḥammad's *sunnah* became the living tradition of the Muslim community, extending itself over almost every aspect of their lives. Most of the Islamic laws and rituals, originating from the *sunnah*, have been preserved through perpetual practice in the Muslim community. The family laws, the ways the prayer and *ḥajj* are performed, and the rules for giving *zakāh*, etc., are all preserved through this machinery. For example, when a teenage Muslim starts offering prayers, they do not check the books of *ḥadīth* to know how to pray. Instead, they just join the community at large, which has been uninterruptedly offering the prayer from the time of the Prophet.

Writing

Lastly and most importantly, the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad was preserved by writing—generally referred to as the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet. It is worthwhile to mention two common criticisms of the *ḥadīth* at the outset before going into further discussion. Firstly, the hadithification of

⁸² Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-ḥajj, bāb al-khuṭbah ayyām minā. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:450-51, ḥadīth 1741.

⁸³ Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' Bayān al-'Ilm* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2015), 1:42.

⁸⁴ Schacht, *Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 80.

the *sunnah* was done against the express will of Prophet Muḥammad.⁸⁵ Secondly, the compilation work of *ḥadīth* took place in the third century AH and there was no written record of it before that.⁸⁶

Regarding the first criticism, a *ḥadīth* quoted in its support states the following:

Do not write down what I say, and whoever has written down anything from me other than the Qur’ān, let him erase it. Narrate from me, and there is nothing wrong with that, but whoever tells a lie about me . . . let him take his place in the Fire.⁸⁷

Initially, Prophet Muḥammad forbade his Companions from writing anything else from him other than the Qur’ān. However, this was not because Prophet Muḥammad aimed not to preserve his *sunnah* or that the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet had no authoritative status. Had it been the case, the Prophet would not have said, as the *ḥadīth* mentioned suggests, “Narrate from me, for there is no harm in it. . . .” The reason for such prohibition on the writing of *ḥadīth* was that in the initial days of the revelation of the Qur’ān, the Companions were not familiar with the Qur’ānic style. Some Companions started mixing Prophetic traditions with Qur’ānic text, which led to fears of alterations in the Qur’ānic text. Hence, Prophet Muḥammad temporarily directed his Companions not to write anything other than the Qur’ān.⁸⁸ However, the other three methods discussed above—memorization, discussion, and practice—were still involved in preserving the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad.

Once the Companions became fully familiar with the Qur’ānic style and there was no fear of mixing Prophetic traditions and the Qur’ānic text, this transitory prohibition was lifted by Prophet Muḥammad. Clear evidence suggests that later, Prophet Muḥammad not only allowed the writing of Prophetic traditions but himself dictated a large number of *ḥadīths*. The book *al-Wathā’iq al-Siyāsiyyah* is remarkable in this regard.⁸⁹ In this work, the author compiled a large number of such documents showing the written directives from Prophet Muḥammad to different governors and delegations—containing different legal rules of the *sharīah*. Here are some examples:

⁸⁵ Parwez and Jairajpuri, *Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, 23–27.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 30–32.

⁸⁷ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-zuḥd, bāb al-tathabbut fī ’l-ḥadīth. The translation is of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 2007), 7:400, ḥadīth 7510.

⁸⁸ Usmani, *Authority of Sunnah*, 94.

⁸⁹ Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā’iq al-Siyāsiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Anfās, 1970), 1–230.

First, Prophet Muḥammad dictated *Kitāb al-Ṣadaqah*, which contained detailed rules about *zakāh*. In this regard, Al-Zuhrī narrates, “The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ had a letter written about charity, but he had not dispatched it to his governors until he died; he kept it with him along with his sword. When he died, Abū Bakr implemented it until he died, as did ‘Umar until he died.”⁹⁰ This letter is now part of *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd.⁹¹

Second, Prophet Muḥammad dictated detailed documents as his directives to the governors of different provinces so that they could rule accordingly. When he sent Mu‘ādh b. Jabal and Mālik b. Murārah to Yemen as his envoys, he dictated to them a document containing certain legal rules.⁹² Similarly, when Prophet Muḥammad appointed Abū Hurayrah and ‘Alī’ b. al-Ḥaḍramī as his representatives to Ḥijar, he dictated directives containing rules about *zakāh* and *‘ushr*.⁹³

Third, when Wā’il b. Ḥujr, a Companion of the Prophet, came from Yemen, he requested the Prophet: “Write an epistle addressed to my people.” Prophet Muḥammad dictated three documents—of which two particularly addressed the rules of the prayer, *zakāh*, prohibition of usury, and other important matters.⁹⁴

These examples support the fact that the Prophet did not aim to stop his Companions from writing *ḥadīth* nor were the Companions in any disobedience to Prophet Muḥammad by writing *ḥadīth*. Furthermore, these examples disprove the second criticism that there was no written record of *ḥadīth* before the third century AH—as it clearly shows that *ḥadīth* existed during the very life of Prophet Muḥammad. Moreover, during the era of the Successors (Tābi‘ūn), pupils of the Companions (first and second century AH), there is clear evidence suggesting ample work was done on preserving *ḥadīth*. During this period, ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz officially ordered his governors to gather all knowledgeable people who knew *ḥadīth* and write down *ḥadīth* from them.⁹⁵ As is usual in the evolution of every science, these works were merged into the later

⁹⁰ Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘*, kitāb al-zakāh, bāb mā jā’ fī ‘l-zakāh. The translation is of *Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhī*, trans. Abu Khaliyl (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 2:80, ḥadīth 621.

⁹¹ Abū Dawūd, *Sunan*, kitāb al-zakāh.

⁹² S. Moinul Haq, trans., *Ibn Sa’d’s Kitāb al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1967), vol. 1, pt., 2, pp. 312-13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 310-11.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 340-41.

⁹⁵ Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, trans. Muḥammad Abū ‘l-Ḥasan (Karachi: Maktabah-i Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth, 2009), 1:174.

works taken by the scholars of *ḥadīth*. However, some manuscripts were preserved. For example, we have *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-Ṣaḥīḥah*, generally referred to as the script of Hammām b. Munabbih. This script was later included in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. Interestingly, in 1954, two copies of this script were discovered in the libraries of Berlin and Damascus.⁹⁶ Later, they were edited and published by Muhammad Hamidullah from Hyderabad Deccan. He also compared the text of the original manuscripts with the one narrated in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and concluded that except for a negligible difference in a few words, they are the same.

Thus, it can be seen that Prophet Muḥammad did not forbid from preserving his *ḥadīths* nor is there any proof of the claim that Prophetic traditions were compiled for the first time in the third century AH. Instead, all possible methods that could be adopted for the preservation of practice were utilized to preserve the Prophetic traditions.

Authenticating *Ḥadīth*: Distinguishing Truth from the Falsehood

As discussed, the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad was diligently preserved by the Companions and their Successors. However, it is a historical fact that the forgery of *ḥadīth* took place in the first four centuries of Islamic history, where many narrations were falsely attributed to Prophet Muḥammad.⁹⁷ Several reasons prompted such forgery, including the pursuit of political agendas amid sectarian conflicts after the Prophet's death, substantiating theological debates, promoting various forms of chauvinism, and motivating people towards Islam. This corruption in *ḥadīth* has created many doubts about the authenticity of the entire corpus of *ḥadīth* literature and the authority of *sunnah* in Islam. A prominent observation made in this regard is that if *ḥadīth* was meant to be the source of Islam or its laws, it would have been protected by God from forgery in the same manner as the Qur'ān.⁹⁸ How valid this observation is can be assessed by the fact that it is conflating *ḥadīth* with *sunnah*. As discussed earlier, it is the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad that holds authoritative status and is the source of Islam, and *ḥadīth* is just one of the sources that reveals the *sunnah*. Thus, the sceptic view about the authority of *sunnah* based on forgery or the possibility of forgery in *ḥadīth* literature is based on the false presumption that *sunnah* and *ḥadīth*

⁹⁶ Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, *Ṣaḥīfah-i Hammām Ibn Munabbih*, trans. Muḥammad Raḥīm al-Dīn (Lahore: Publication Center of Islamic Culture, 2010), 4.

⁹⁷ Jonathan A. C. Brown, "Authenticating Hadith and the History of Hadith Criticism," Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 6-15. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/authenticating-hadith-and-the-history-of-hadith-criticism>.

⁹⁸ Parwez and Jairajpuri, *Status of Hadeeth in Islam*, 22-23.

are the same. Furthermore, the prevalence of forgery in *ḥadīth*, rather than undermining the authority of *sunnah*, lends more credibility to its authority. The fact that people associated fabricated narrations with Prophet Muḥammad to validate their motives underscores the authoritative status of the Prophet Muḥammad and his *sunnah*. Had the *sunnah* not been authoritative for Muslims, there would have been no incentive for such forgery in *ḥadīth*.

To authenticate *ḥadīth* and confront the issue of *ḥadīth* forgery, a very systematic science of *ḥadīth* criticism was developed over time by the *ḥadīth* scholars to authenticate reported *ḥadīths*. It contains a bipartite scrutiny mechanism where *ḥadīth* is scrutinized based on its source (*sanad*) and its content (*matan*).

Scrutinizing the Sanad of Ḥadīth

In evaluating the *sanad* of *ḥadīth*, a three-tiered approach was developed to ascertain its authenticity. The first tier involves scrutinizing the alleged narrators' honesty and memory to determine their credibility and competence.⁹⁹ If all narrators in a chain are deemed upright individuals with good memories, the next test would come into play. However, if even a single narrator is found untruthful, possessing a weak memory, or unknown, the report would be rejected without any further investigation.

To execute this test, a comprehensive science known as '*ilm al-rijāl*' (biographical science of *ḥadīth* narrators) was developed. Scholars of this science precisely investigated the lives of every *ḥadīth* narrator, leaving no stone unturned in examining their character, capacity, lifestyle, family background, and social standing. This investigation led to the compilation of numerous books on this subject alone. For instance, renowned scholar, al-Ḥafiz Ibn Ḥajr al-'Asqalānī compiled the following three significant books:

1. *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*: This book gives brief accounts of nearly ten thousand narrators found in the six primary collections of *ḥadīths*.
2. *Lisān al-Mīzān*: It introduces nearly six thousand narrators whose reported *ḥadīths* are found in books other than the six primary collections of *ḥadīths*.
3. *Ta'jīl al-Manfa'ah*: This book introduces approximately seventeen hundred narrators whose reported *ḥadīths* are found in the books of the four Sunni imams.

⁹⁹ Usmani, *Authority of Sunnah*, 120.

Once a *ḥadīth* passes the scrutiny of its narrators, it is tested based on the consistency of the chain.¹⁰⁰ This involved ensuring the chain remained intact without any missing narrators. Geographical and time connections between the narrators are examined to verify whether it is historically possible for the narrator to receive the *ḥadīth* directly from such and such person in the chain. If the chain is broken at any point, the *ḥadīth* is considered unreliable. Scholars examining the chain generally rely on the data provided in the literature of *‘ilm al-rijāl*.

Finally, *ḥadīth* scrutiny involves corroboration of a reported *ḥadīth*, a crucial aspect of authenticating any *ḥadīth*. Corroboration means that if one person reported a *ḥadīth* but its absence was noted in the transmission of that *ḥadīth* by other students of the same source, its authenticity would be questionable. Corroboration usually takes two forms: witness (*shāhid*) and parallelism (*mutāba‘ah*). The former occurs when a Companion narrates a *ḥadīth* similar to another Companion’s transmission or statement on a different occasion. The latter indicated one reporter confirming a report by another transmitter, stating they both heard or received it from a common source.¹⁰¹

Scrutinizing the Content of Ḥadīths

Unlike the chains of *ḥadīths*, historically, there has been some reluctance on the part of the scholars of *ḥadīth* to scrutinize the content of *ḥadīths*. The situation has been best described by Brown in the following words:

This tension between submitting one’s reason to a transmitted text and using one’s to evaluate the text’s authenticity has furnished fertile ground for debate among Muslim scholars until today.¹⁰²

Although this reluctance stemmed from the inclination to submit one’s reason to revelation regardless of its content, over time, there has been a shift in this approach. The content of a *ḥadīth* has mainly tested on the touchstone of the Qur’ān, its mutual harmony with the overall science of *ḥadīth*, and human reason. However, it is worth mentioning that mainstream Sunni scholars such as al-Suyūṭī and Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī were of the view that the door of possible interpretation of a *ḥadīth* is definitely wide and a *ḥadīth* could only be rejected due to its contents after all efforts to reconcile its meaning with the Qur’ān and established *sunnah* had failed.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰¹ Brown, “Authenticating Hadith,” 34–38.

¹⁰² Ibid., 45.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

The most important test for evaluating the content of *ḥadīths* had been scrutinizing *ḥadīths* in the light of the Qur'ān.¹⁰⁴ Any *ḥadīth* that stood contrary to the Qur'ān had been regarded as invalid *ḥadīth*. The reason for such is obvious. It has been discussed earlier that *sunnah* brings its legitimacy from the Qur'ān. So, a *ḥadīth* quoting Prophet Muḥammad having said something contrary to the Qur'ān would mean that the Prophet said or acted against the very source that delegated him the authority to stand as a Prophet of God. The Qur'ān makes its position very clear when it says, “It is Allah Who has sent down the Book (the Qur'an) in truth, and the Balance (i.e., to act justly).”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the Qur'ān being *mīzān* (the balance), requires things to come to its standard and not vice versa. It is worthy to quote the view of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal here. Al-Faḍl b. Ziyād reported the following:

I heard Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal responding to a question on the opinion that the *sunnah* overrules the Qur'ān. Aḥmad said, “I do not dare say that; rather, the *sunnah* is the explanation of the Book and its clarification.”¹⁰⁶

An example of a *ḥadīth* that has been rejected on its being contrary to the Qur'ān is when Ibn Umar reported that the Prophet said, “The deceased is tormented because of the crying of his family for him.”¹⁰⁷ When this came to the knowledge of 'Ā'ishah, she rejected it by saying, “The Qur'ān is sufficient for you: ‘And no bearer of burdens shall bear another’s burden’ [35:18].”¹⁰⁸

Further, every *ḥadīth* is considered a small unit of the overall science of *ḥadīth*.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, it is necessary to consult all the variant texts of *ḥadīth* on the same subject before extracting any ruling from it. For example, a *ḥadīth* states, “It is better for any of you that the inside of his body be filled with pus which may consume his body than it is filled with poetry.”¹¹⁰ This *ḥadīth* when compared to the relatively authentic *ḥadīth* reported by 'Ā'ishah loses its validity. 'Ā'ishah says that the *ḥadīth* was not taken properly from the Prophet who said, “Someone’s stomach

¹⁰⁴ Khan, *Authentication of Hadith*, 46–72.

¹⁰⁵ Qur'ān 42:17.

¹⁰⁶ Abū Ḥayyān, *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* (Karachi: al-Risālah al-'Ālamiyyah, 2010), 6:12.

¹⁰⁷ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-mayyit yu'adhhab bi bukā' ahlihi 'alayh. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:458, ḥadīth 2150.

¹⁰⁸ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-mayyit yu'adhhab bi bukā' ahlihi 'alayh. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:459, ḥadīth 2150.

¹⁰⁹ Khan, *Authentication of Hadith*, 85–118.

¹¹⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-adab, bāb mā yukrahu an yakūn al-ghālib 'alā 'l-insān al-shi'r. The translation is of *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:103, ḥadīth 6155.

should be filled with vomited out stuff and blood than to be filled with the poem in which I have been defamed and ridiculed.”¹¹¹

Also, *ḥadīths* are tested on the touchstone of the reason.¹¹² The Qur’ān regards the human intellect as a distinguishing feature that makes humans superior to other creatures. According to the Qur’ān, one of the most appreciable characteristics of believers is that they do not fall blindly on the revelation; instead, they ponder upon it.¹¹³ Therefore, *ḥadīths* which are inconceivable by the reason because of their factual or historical incorrectness are not taken.

Conclusion

Islamic law rests upon the Qur’ān, regarded as the Book of God bestowed upon Prophet Muḥammad. The Qur’ān, as the supreme authority, defines Prophet Muḥammad as an exemplary teacher, legislator, judge, and interpreter. It asserts that whatever Prophet Muḥammad said, did, or endorsed in his prophetic capacity carries authority for Muslims. This authority cannot be diminished by limiting its duration or excluding his laws, judgements, and interpretations of the Qur’ān. Building upon this premise, scholars of Islamic jurisprudence have defined the *sunnah* as encompassing the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of Prophet Muḥammad, declaring it a primary source of Islamic law along with the Qur’ān. This source is not merely preserved in writing but also through the conduct of the Muslim community.

This understanding of the *sunnah*, as stipulated by the Qur’ān, dismisses portrayals of the *sunnah* as a normative ethical-religious behavioural system or an Abrahamic tradition, as advocated by Fazlur Rahman and Ghamdi respectively. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the mere epistemological or etymological analysis of the *sunnah* and its scrutiny based on modern principles of historical criticism—pursued by Western orientalist, particularly by Schacht—cannot compromise the authoritative status of Prophet Muḥammad’s *sunnah* as a source of Islamic law. In Islamic law, significance is not attached to the concept of the *sunnah* itself; rather, it pertains to the “precedents set by Prophet Muḥammad,” for which the term *sunnah* is utilized.

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¹¹¹ Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Ijābah li Irād mā istadrakathu ‘Ā’sihah ‘alā ‘l-Ṣaḥābah* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah li ‘l-Ṭibā‘ah wa ‘l-Nashr wa ‘l-Tawzī’, 2004), 111.

¹¹² Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Fundamentals of Hadith Interpretations*, trans. Tariq Mahmood Hashmi (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2009), 44.

¹¹³ Qur’ān, 25:73.