

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HADITH AND SUNNA

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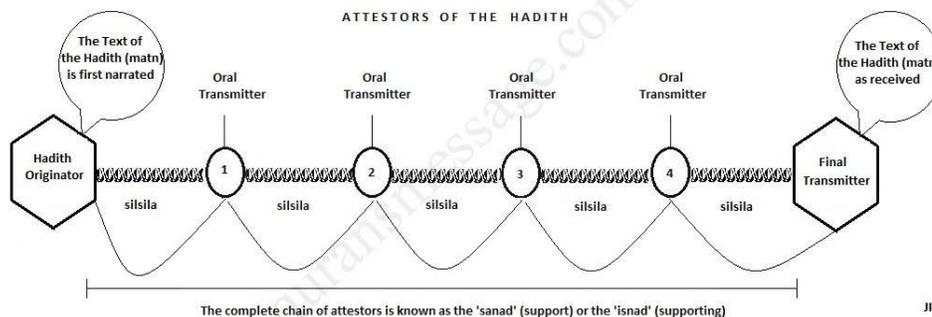
Though the terms Hadith and Sunna are considered quite synonymous, they are actually very distinct from one another.

HADITH

The Arabic word 'Hadith' means a report, tale, story, statement, narration, a communication or a discourse. Its plural form is 'Ahadith'. In common parlance, 'Hadith' has now become synonymous with a specific body of work within Islamic literature which constitutes narrations that depict the words and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which are attributed to him.

Every 'hadith' has two constituent parts:

The first part is the chain of attestors (silsila) which includes the 'Hadith Originator' and the 'Final Transmitter' of that hadith. Between the Hadith originator and the final transmitter, there are any numbers of transmitters who have passed on the hadith orally from one to the other over any given period of time. The complete chain is known as the '**sanad**' (support) or the '**isnad**' (supporting).



The actual wording (text) of the hadith is known as the '**matn**' and is carried from the originator of the hadith through all the oral transmitters to the final transmitter.

A Hadith is usually classified as '**ahad**' (single / limited chain(s) of transmission) or '**tawatur**' (mutawatir - multiple chains of transmission of the same hadith report).

However, a more technical definition of a report which has reached the status of 'tawatur' is one which is understood to be conveyed by narrators so numerous that it is considered inconceivable that they could have agreed on a falsehood of what is being narrated underscoring its veracity (ilm yaqeen - certain knowledge). Though there is no consensus upon the number of narrators required for such a status, it is understood nevertheless that multiple narrators existed at each level of the chain of transmission. At times the terms 'mutawatir' and 'mashhur' (well-established) are also used interchangeably. [1]

In contrast, an 'ahad' transmission is one which has not been deemed to reach the level of qualification of a 'tawatur' transmission. Each of the transmissions is then usually divided into sub-categories by Hadith scholars.

The vast majority of the Ahadith corpus is based on an '**ahad**' transmission which merely provides nothing more than a single source of evidence. So in effect, what one originator narrates, no other narrator passes on the same hadith. It is argued whether any 'tawatur' hadith (multiple sources of hadith) actually exist, and if so, what they actually are. What one scholar may consider as 'tawatur' may be rejected by another, hence the subjectivity inherent in the enterprise.

This single source of evidence which qualifies the vast Ahadith reports which make up the corpus should be noted in the light of the Quran which even for basic debt transactions, demands for at least two witnesses (2:282). Surely, one may ask, something as important as a Prophetic testimony would demand multiple corroboration.

"As laid out by Wael Hallaq and others, classical Muslim legal theorists held that the vast preponderance of the hadith corpus consisted of ahad hadiths, namely, reports transmitted by a limited number of chains of transmission. Even when transmitted by sahih isnads, these hadiths were therefore only probably authentic statements of the Prophet, according to the epistemological worldview of these legal theorists. To achieve certainty about the authenticity of any report emanating from the past, legal theorists required massive corroboration (tawatur) seldom if ever attained in the hadith tradition" [2]

Within the Sunni tradition alone, the number of Ahadith amount to the ten's of thousands. Quite a few are repeated, but invariably the extent of the Hadith corpus is quite voluminous. This is even more so when considered along with the Shi'a corpus.

SUNNA

Whereas the 'Hadith' is an oral communication that is allegedly derived from the Prophet or his teachings, the 'Sunna' (quite literally: mode of life, behaviour or example) signifies the prevailing customs of a particular community or people. A practice which is contained within the Hadith may well be regarded as Sunna, but it is not necessary that a Sunna would have a supporting hadith sanctioning it.

Therefore, a 'Sunna' is a practice which has been **passed on by a community from generation to generation en masse**, whereas the Ahadith are reports collected by later compilers often centuries removed from the source.

The recognition of distinctness between the 'sunna' and 'hadith' has also been captured within the Islamic literature. For example, Abd al-Rahman b. al-Mahdi (d.198 AH) characterizes three theological authorities, Sufyan al-Thawri, Al-Awza'i and Malik b. Anas by saying that:

"The first was an imam in the hadith **but not** in the sunna (i.e. he had gathered much material about the Prophet's sayings without becoming an authority for what is to be taken as the traditional norm in the rites and laws that govern the practical conduct of life); the second was imam *fi'l-sunna wa-laysa bi-imam fi'l-hadith* (i.e. he knew the law without being an authority on the traditional sayings of the Prophet); but Malik was an undisputed master in both these fields (*imam fi'hima jami'an*). In the same way it is said of Abu Yusuf, the well-known pupil of Abu Hanifa, that he was *sahib hadith wa-sahib sunna*" [3]

It should also be appreciated that the 'Ahadith' literature has often reached us from compilations which are **centuries removed** from the Prophetic period that they often intend to capture.

Therefore, the development of 'Sunna' practices within the **first centuries of Islam** and whether or not they had prophetic or early companion sanction **can never be guaranteed**. Certain practices not supported by the Quran could have developed after the death of the Prophet and become fused with local culture / traditions, disseminated, and then later given sanction by Hadith.

There exists **no fool-proof method to actually 'witness' those practices**. Often, we only know of them from the Hadith literature. Hence, there is some justification to accept the view that the Hadith is often the **'vehicle'** which conveys information about the 'Sunna'.

Many Muslim theologians have sought to define the difference between the Sunna and Hadith and develop its terminology and remit. No doubt, a Sunna practice has greater authority over Hadith, if one only considers the fact that it has a consensus of the community and is propagated generation to generation, en masse. **However, this does not render it infallible.**

As an example, it is worthwhile to consider the following questions.

Was the 'kissing of the Black Stone' actually a practice that was carried out by the Prophet, or was this a practice that:

- (a) Originally existed before the advent of Islam, was later curtailed by the Prophet, but after the Prophet's demise started to find support again in practice? or
- (b) Was a practice that started later within the first century of Islam and was further given sanction in Ahadith literature by referencing it to Caliph Umar?

No one can with **absolute certainty conclude** that the Prophet **actually 'kissed the black stone'**. We only have this event mentioned in compilations centuries **removed from source**. To hold the view that the communities faithfully transmitted this practice as part of the 'Sunna' is a matter of **'belief'** and **'faith in the transmission'**, **not evidence**.

(Please see related article [1] below)

Hence, albeit the Sunna is a powerful indicator of a 'living tradition' among the early followers of Islam, **it is by no means infallible**. The Sunna and the Hadith should therefore remain subservient to the Quran and be understood through its 'lens' of scrutiny.

All communities have a 'living tradition' or a Sunna. No doubt, the early Arab communities would have also held local customs and traditions. The purpose of the Quran was to remove such customs and beliefs which were **incongruent** with its teachings and not necessarily forbid those that were not. For example, we note the following with regards Safa and Marwah in the Quran.

002:158

"Indeed! Safa and Marwa are among the Symbols of God. So whoever performs Hajj or Umrah of the House and circumambulates them (**Arabic: yattawwafa bihima**), there is no blame on him. And whoever voluntarily does good then indeed, God is All-Appreciative, All-Knowing".

It is clear from the above verse that an **option** was granted to circumambulate (tawaaf) both the sites of Safa and Marwah. The verse did not prescribe a new practice (Sunna) but rather, sanctioned an old one. There is also no support in the Quran that Safa and Marwa were hills or that they had anything to do with the commonly understood Abraham-Hagar narrative which involves Ishmael as a small child. To walk around the sites of both Safa and Marwah clearly seems to be an old Arab practice which is being granted sanction.

(Please see related article [2] below)

It was the removal of anti-Islamic Arab practices and beliefs, sanctioning of ancient Abrahamic rites and those **consistent** with the spirit of Islam (such as the tawaaf of Safa and Marwah) that the Quran originally came to address. In this way, the existing 'system' of the Arabs (which included practices and beliefs) was **'perfected'** and Islam was **reinstated**.

005:003

"...This day have I **perfected** your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion..."

(Please see related article [3] below)

COMPARISON WITH THE QURAN

Regrettably, many Muslims assert that the Quran has also reached us in the same manner as the Ahadith and Sunna. As discussed, the Ahadith corpus is primarily an oral propagation reliant mainly on 'ahad' transmitters and later committed to text. The Sunna remains a practical propagation of certain practices which possess the consensus of the community.

The Quran on the other hand, has reached us both by a rigorous oral and written form along with the complete consensus of the Muslim communities.

"...Thus, if the Qur'an had been transmitted only orally for the first century, sizeable variations between texts such as in the hadith and pre-Islamic poetry would be found, and if it had been transmitted only in writing, sizeable variations such as those in different transmissions of the original document of the Constitution of Medina would be found. But neither is the case with the Qur'an. There must have been a parallel written transmission limiting variation in the oral transmission to the graphic form, side by side with a parallel oral transmission preserving the written transmission from corruption. The oral transmission of the Qur'an was essentially static, rather than organic. There was a single text, and nothing, not even allegedly abrogated material, could be taken out, nor anything be put in..." [4]

(Please see related article [4] below)

Of greater importance however, the Quran does not seek support because it has community consensus. Rather, it requires one to believe in its veracity once **it has presented you with its clear arguments**. No scripture can be accepted purely on the basis that the same community profess its Divine origins and have themselves sought to protect it.

Rather, an outsider can only accept its veracity based on the strengths of its claims.

So indeed, there exists a similarity with the Sunna in that the Quran has the consensus of Islamic communities. However, the practices of the communities have **no authority** in by themselves. Rather, they can only achieve '**religious sanction**' from the 'lens' of the Quran's scrutiny.

Furthermore, if belief in the Quran's veracity is admitted, it is clear that the Quran does not support any type of 'Sunna' that does not find sanction from the Quran. For example, both 'Salah' (prayers) and 'Zakah' (alms giving) have scriptural support as to its **establishment**.

Therefore, Sunna practices of the early communities with regards prayer and alm's giving would be supported by the Quran. On the contrary, Sunna practices for example, involving kissing of the Black Stone, or whispering the 'Iqama' (similar recitation to the Adhan) in the ears of a new born child

finds no support in the Quran and therefore should not be regarded as being part of the 'religion' instituted by the Quran.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is a fundamental difference between the Hadith and Sunna and though often used synonymously, should be kept distinct.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Kissing the Black Stone - Veneration or an Idolatrous Practice?](#)
- (2) [Did Prophet Abraham \(pbuh\) Really Send His Wife Hagar and Son Ishmael \(pbuh\) Away Alone to a Barren Land?](#)
- (3) [What is the True Definition of 'Deen' from a Quran's Perspective?](#)
- (4) [The Compilation of the Quran](#)
- (5) [How Do We Know that the Quran was Fully Preserved? - Is it Not the Ahadith That Informs Us?](#)

REFERENCES

[1] AHMED. R, *Narratives of Islamic Legal Theory*, Oxford Islamic Legal Studies, Oxford University Press, *Re-creating the Prophetic Model*, Sarakshi on the *Sunna* Abrogating the Qur'an, Page 106

[2] BROWN. J, *Did the Prophet Say It or Not? The Literal, Historical, and Effective Truth of Hadiths in Early Sunnism*, BROWN: *The Truth of Hadiths in Early Sunnism*, University of Washington, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129.2 (2009), Page 261

Highlights marked in bold black are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[3] GOLDZIHHER. I, (*Muhammedanische Studien*) *Muslim Studies Volume II* Edited by S.M.Stern: Translated by C. R. Barber and S.M.Stern (George Allen & Unwin Ltd) Page 25 - Cited as quotation 2: Yahya b.Mu'in in *Tab.Huff.*, VI, no 41.

Highlights marked in bold black are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[4] BROCKETT. A.A, *Studies in Two Transmissions of the Quran*, University of St. Andrews, Department of Arabic Studies, Ph.D. thesis 1984, Chapter Conclusion, Page 142

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