

The Quran and its Message

The articles on this website may be reproduced freely as long as the following source reference is provided:
Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM 'SUNNA' FROM A QURAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Joseph A Islam

Copyright © 2009 Joseph A Islam: Article last modified 2nd February 2012

The Arabic word 'Sunna' comes from the Arabic root word: **SIN-NUN-NUN** and means to follow a well trodden path, a line or mode of conduct that is well established in practical terms.

Whereas 'Sunna' has been specifically mentioned in the Quran, it may come as a surprise to many Muslims that the common understanding that the term represents the personal practices of Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) **is not supported anywhere in the Quran nor is it understood as such.**

Indeed, the Quran does inform the 'believers' that in the Prophet there is a good example.

033.021

"Verily in the messenger of God you have a good example (**Arabic: Aswahtun Hasanatun**) for him who looks to God and the Last Day, and remembers God much"

This 'good example' is then misunderstood by many Muslims as representing the Ahadith and Sunna of Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) as it has come down to them today through practice and secondary source documents over the many centuries with all its details. This view, finds little support from the Quran.

Please see related article [1] below

What is often not mentioned is that exactly the same term 'good example' (Arabic: Aswahtun Hasantun) has also been used for Prophet Abraham. ^(pbuh)

060.004

"There is for you a good example (**Arabic: Aswahtun Hasanatun**) in Abraham and those with him..."

From an analysis of the Quranic verses, it becomes evident that the reference to a 'good example' (Arabic: Aswahtun Hasantun) is not a reference to the Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) exclusively or his deeds which are only captured by the [Islamic secondary sources](#) within the Sunni and Shia canons.

Rather, the 'good example' (Aswahtun Hasanatun) refers to a total rejection of anything that is worshipped besides God and by placing complete trust in God and the Last day. This is an example that all messengers of God set for their people and indeed, this is what the Quran is particularly referencing in this instance. The same verse (60.4) clearly elaborates this point.

060.004

"There is for you a good example (Arabic: Aswahtun Hasantun) in Abraham and those with him when they said to their people: "We are clear of you and of whatever ye worship besides God: we have rejected you, and there has arisen, between us and you, enmity and hatred for ever unless ye believe in God and Him alone" ...

HOW DOES THE QURAN MAKE USE OF THE WORD SUNNAH?

The Quran fundamentally refers to Sunna in two main types of contexts both supporting a central theme.

- (1) Sunnatu-lawalina
- (2) Sunnata-Ilahi

(1) Sunnatu-lawalina

سُنَّتِ الْأَوَّلِينَ

This literally means 'Ways of the former people' and is used to describe ancient nations who mainly rejected the truth and were visited by God's wrath.

008.038

"Say to the Unbelievers, if they desist, their past would be forgiven them; but if they persist, the punishment of those before them (Arabic: Sunnatu -lawalina (Former people)) is already (a matter of warning for them)"

015.011-13

"And there never came a messenger to them but they mocked him. Thus do We make it to enter into the hearts of the guilty. They do not believe in it, and indeed the example of the former people (Arabic: Sunnatu-lawalina) has already passed.

018:055

"And what is there to keep back men from believing, now that guidance has come to them, nor from praying for forgiveness from their Lord, but that the ways of the ancients (Arabic: Sunnatu I-awalina) be repeated with them, or the Wrath be brought to them face to face"

(2) Sunnata-Ilahi

سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ

This term signifies the way of God and has been consistently made use of by the Quran to signify that there is no change in the way the Lord deals with these persistent transgressors. He does not change the 'goal posts' nor is He unfair. He is perfectly consistent and absolute in His judgment.

What is interesting to note is that both terms have been used to specifically signify ancient societies who rejected the truth and on whom fell the wrath of God in a consistent manner.

033.062

“(Such was) the practice of God (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**) among those who lived aforetime: No change will you find in the practice of God (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**)”

040.085

“But their professing the Faith when they (actually) saw Our Punishment was not going to profit them. (Such has been) God's Way (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**) of dealing with His Servants (from the most ancient times). And even thus did the Rejecters of God perish (utterly)!”

048.023

“(Such has been) the practice of God (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**) already in the past: no change will you find in the practice of God (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**)”

Please see related article [2] below

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Quran does not make use of, nor does it mention the term 'Sunna' to describe the particular practices of any Prophet including Prophet Muhammad. ^(pbuh) Rather, it is a term that has been specifically used by the Quran to depict the ways of ancient nations (or people) who had transgressed and on whom visited the wrath of God.

The following verse makes this point clearly making use of both Arabic terms, 'Sunnata Awalina' and 'Sunnata-Ilahi' together in one verse.

035.043

“On account of their arrogance in the land and their plotting of evil, but the plotting of evil will only encompass its own people. Now are they but waiting for the way the ancients were dealt with (**Arabic: Sunnata Awalina**)? But no change will you find in God's way (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**): and never will you find in God's way (**Arabic: Sunnata-Ilahi**) any change”

Once again, this article does not intend to challenge or undermine the requirements of certain practices which have their sources from God's scriptures (Such as prayer, righteous deeds, practices in the spirit of the Quran's message etc) but rather intends to convey to the reader how the word 'Sunna' is actually used by the Quran and in what context.

However, it should also be appreciated that the **personal** likes / dislikes, attire, mannerisms, practices of Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh), given his particular society, cultural norms and time in history **have also not been mentioned by the Quran** as an **instructive or prescribed 'Sunna'** to be followed by succeeding generations.

It is the message of the Quran that ultimately remains timeless and is to be used as the base and filtering point of any given society. The personal mannerisms and practices of a certain people will always be indicative of the cultural norms and the fabric of society dependant on the particular slice of history they represent. The problem occurs when an attempt is made to reconcile the practices of a modern era with one from antiquity.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Following the Example of the Prophet - What is that Example?](#)
- (2) [Does 'Hikmah' \(Wisdom\) Mean Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad ^{\(pbuh\)}?](#)

[Joseph Islam](#)

© 2010 Quransmessage.com All Rights Reserved