

# Preservation of Sunnah (part 1 of 4)

**Description:** An introduction to the collection of *hadith*, its preservation and transmission. Part 1: Divine preservation of *Sunnah* and the first stage in the collection of *hadith*.

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## Prerequisite

- Beginners Guide to Hadith & Sunnah.

## Objectives

- Introduction to collection of *hadith*.
- The necessity and reason for divine preservation of *Sunnah*.
- Appreciate the transmission of *hadith* especially in written form in Prophet Muhammad's lifetime.
- Identify the Prophet's method in teaching *Sunnah*.
- Identify the companion's method in learning *Sunnah* from the Prophet.

## Arabic Terms

- *Hajj* - A pilgrimage to Mecca where the pilgrim performs a set of rituals. The *Hajj* is one of the five pillars of Islam, which every adult Muslim must undertake at least once in their life if they can afford it and are physically able.
- *Zakah* - obligatory charity.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Hadith* - (plural - *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad.

After the Quran, *Sunnah* or *Hadith*<sup>[1]</sup> is the second source from which the teachings and laws of Islam are drawn. The *Sunnah* details all aspects of a Muslim's life including prayer, fasting, *Hajj*, *zakah*, marriage, divorce, child custody, war, and peace. Someone who embraced Islam then, just as today, is in need of Quran and *Sunnah*. Just as a Muslim is required to accept and follow the Quran, a Muslim is bound to accept and act on the *hadith* of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him.

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

## Divine Preservation of *Sunnah*

Allah, the Exalted, says in the Quran:

**“Indeed, it is We who sent down the reminder and indeed, We will be its guardian.” (Quran 15:9)**

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

## First Stage in Collection of *Hadith*

### Transmission of *Hadith* during the Prophet's Lifetime

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

When a deputation of the Rabi'a came to him in the early days of Medina, the Prophet concluded his instructions to them with the words: **“Remember this and report it to those whom you have left behind.”**<sup>[2]</sup> He instructed in another case: **“Go back to your people and teach them these things.”**<sup>[3]</sup>

It is also recorded that people would come to the Prophet and demand teachers who could teach them the Quran and the *Sunnah*: **“Send us men to teach us the Quran and the *Sunnah*.”**<sup>[4]</sup>

On the occasion of the pilgrimage, the Prophet after enjoining on the Muslims the duty of holding each other's life, property and honor sacred, added: **“He who is present here should carry this message to him who is absent.”**<sup>[5]</sup>

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

The *Sunnah* was therefore recognized as affording guidance in religious matters in the life-time of the Prophet. He used to teach his *Sunnah* primarily in three ways:

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

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

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

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

(a) Memorization: The companions used to listen to every word of the Prophet with utmost attention. They learnt the Quran and the *hadith* from the Prophet in the mosque. When the Prophet went away for any reason, they started to recollect what they had learned. Anas bin Malik, the servant of the Prophet, said:

"We sat with the Prophet, maybe sixty persons in number, and the Prophet taught them *hadith*. Later on when he went out for any necessity, we used to memorize it amongst us, when we departed it was as if it was cultivated in our hearts."[\[7\]](#)

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

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

"I asked the Messenger of Allah for permission to record what I heard from him and he permitted me and I recorded it."[\[9\]](#)

Imam Ahmad's *Musnad* has 626 *hadith* from Abdullah. Bukhari singularly recorded 8 and Muslim recorded 20, 7 of which they have in common.

(c) Practicing: The Companions used to put into practice whatever they memorized or wrote. It is sufficient to note that Ibn Umar took eight years to learn Surah Al-Baqara.

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Endnotes:

[\[1\]](#) The word *hadith* is often used for plural as well.

[\[2\]](#) *Mishkat*

[\[3\]](#) *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[\[4\]](#) *Saheeh Muslim*

[\[5\]](#) *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[\[6\]](#) *Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud*

[\[7\]](#) *Khatib, al-Jami.*

[\[8\]](#) *Abu 'Ubaid, al-Amwal.*

[\[9\]](#) *Ibn Sa'd.*

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