

The Neglected Sunnah: Sunnat Allāh (The Sunnah of God)

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The present article is a contribution to the continuing discussion of sunnah. I hope to show the scholar who deals with texts referring to sunnah that he or she is not, when interpreting a text containing the word, confined to a choice between the sunnah of the Prophet, local sunnah, and the sunnah of the Companions and the early community. It is quite possible that the sunnah referred to is the sunnah mentioned in the Qur'an, namely, the sunnah of God.

We must remember certain characteristics of sunnah:¹ a) it is set intentionally by one having the authority to do so—the imam; b) it is meant to be imitated and not changed; and c) the imam who sets the sunnah shares responsibility for the deeds of those who imitate him.

What seems to be missing from most discussions of sunnah is the fact that it is a Qur'anic notion as well. Joseph Schacht, for example, quotes no Qur'anic occurrences, not even in his 1963 article that asserts that the sunnah of the Prophet was precisely to follow the Qur'an.² Bravmann's citation of Q 8:38 at the end of his discussion of the phrase *maḍat sunnat al awwalīn* is the only Qur'anic instance of the word that he cites in his own voice; the others are in quotations from al Shāfi'ī, Ibn Hishām, and

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¹Two useful discussions of the concept are to be found in Bravmann (1972), pp. 123-98; and Morony (1984), p. 434.

²The works referred to are his *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence, An Introduction to Islamic Law*, and "Sur l'expression 'Sunna du Prophète'."

al Baydāwī.³ Apparently neither Muṣṭafā al Sibā'ī⁴ nor Muḥammad al Khaṭīb⁵ refer to the sunnah of God.

The sunnah that God sets for Himself is certainly authoritative, unchanging, and meant to be imitated. But it is more important to note that God's sunnah is also what God Himself does, what He has prescribed for Himself. Human beings know that God will inevitably do a certain thing because He has always done the same thing in the past. These are universal and unchanging rules and, as such, can form the basis for logical arguments. The branch of modern legal logic called rule-based reasoning holds that such reasoning is prior to all other forms, since no communication—using the word in the concrete and not the metaphorical sense—can even take place until the interlocutors agree on certain rules, such as the rules of language.⁶

God may not be called an imam, but a book can be so called. The record of a person's deeds is called imam in Q 36:12; the book of Moses is twice called an imam and a mercy confirmed by *this* book (Q 11:17 and 46:12). The arbitration document of Šiffīn says that the Qur'an is to be taken as an imam (Hamīd Allāh n.d.). Al Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al Hanafīyah (75/694-5) says: "The Qur'an is our imam" (van Ess 1974), and Ibn Qutaybah quotes a *khutbah* by the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al Mālik in which he directs the believers to take the Qur'an as an imam ('*Uyūn al Akhbār* 1964).

The Qur'anic Verses

The word "sunnah" occurs fourteen times, plus twice in the plural. Eight of those times it is in the phrase *sunnat Allāh* and once in the word *sunnatinā*, when God is speaking. Four times it comes in the phrase *sunnat al awwalīn* (sunnah of the ancients), and once it is annexed to previous prophets. The two occurrences of the plural *sunan* are associated with vanished nations.

Q 3:137 comes after a passage forbidding usury, commanding obedience to God and the Apostle, praising various virtues, and urging people to seek God's forgiveness of their sins: "*Sunan* have gone before

³Respectively on p. 135, n. 2 in *Kitāb al Umm* (Bulāq ed.), ii, 2; p. 121, 8 (*Sunnat Allāh*); pp. 143-44 of *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Wüstenfeld ed.), 595 (Q 3:131/7); and p. 144 of *Tafsīr* (Fleisher ed.) i, 176, 16. Bravmann's citation of Q 8:39/38 is on pp. 147-48.

⁴See his *Al Sunna wa Makānatuha fī al Tashrī' al Islāmī*.

⁵See his *al Sunnah qabl al Tadwīn*.

⁶See Gottlieb (1968), especially pp. 1-49.

you, so travel in the earth and see what the punishment was of those who denied the Truth." This is followed by a verse stating that this is a *bayān* (clear evidence) to all people and a sermon to the righteous.

After a passage describing legal marriage comes Q 4:26: "God wishes to make clear to you and show you the *sunan* of those before you and to turn toward you. . ." That is followed by a passage on the avoidance of various forms of desire and vanity.

In a passage recounting the actions of the unbelievers, God's plan for them, and how the Prophet is to deal with them, the Qur'an says in 8:38: "Say to the unbelievers that if they desist, their past conduct will be forgiven, but if they persist, the *sunnah* of the ancients has gone before."

Q 15:13 is integrated syntactically with preceding verses describing earlier nations' rejection of their prophets: "Thus We let it slip into the hearts of sinners, that they will not believe in it; and the *sunnah* of the ancients has passed away." This is followed by the comment that they would not believe even if a door were opened to them from heaven.

Q 17:77 again addresses the Makkans who opposed the Prophet: "This was the *sunnah* of the apostles We sent before you; and you will find no change in Our *sunnah*." The next verse directs the Prophet to establish regular prayers.

Q 18:55 comes after a passage describing the Day of Judgment and the sinners' first view of the Fire as well as the fact that everything has been explained in this Qur'an, but human beings are the most contentious of all things: "Nothing keeps people from believing now that guidance has come to them, and from asking their Lord for forgiveness, unless it is that the *sunnah* of previous peoples should come upon them, or that punishment should come upon them face to face (or 'suddenly')."

Q 33:38 comes immediately after the verse legitimating the marriage of the Prophet to Zaynab bint Jahsh. Verse 36 eliminates the option of choice after a matter has been decided by God and His Messenger, verse 37 validates the marriage, and verse 38 says: "There can be no difficulty for the Prophet in what God has laid upon him as a duty, (according to) God's *sunnah* among those who have gone before; and the command of God is a set decree."

Q 33:62 follows a description of the hypocrites' stirring up of sedition in Madīnah: "They shall have a curse on them: wherever they are found, they shall be seized and killed [according to] *sunnat Allāh* among those who have gone before, and you will find no change in *sunnat Allāh*."

Q 35:43 comes after a recital of the powers of God and the impotence of all partners ascribed to Him. Though the Quraysh swore their strongest oaths by God that if a warner came they would follow him, in fact they broke their oaths. Verse 43 says in part: ". . . but the evil plot

will catch only the plotters. Are they looking at anything other than *sunnat al awwalīn*? You will not find any change (*tabdīl*) to *sunnat Allāh* and you will not find any turning aside (*taḥwīl*) of *sunnat Allāh*." Then in verse 44: "Do they not travel in the earth and see what was the end of those before them, and they were stronger than these . . .," thus strengthening the warning with an argument *a fortiori*. Of the eleven occurrences of this travel-in-the-earth formula, three—3:137, 35:43, and 40:82—occur in or next to *sunnah* passages.

Students of Mu'tazilī theology are familiar with the next passage, Q 40:84-85, which explains that belief as the result of actually viewing one's punishment does the dilatory believer no good, for it has come too late and only as the result of compulsion. Verse 82 has already invited the hearer to travel in the earth and see the fate of earlier nations; verse 85 then says ". . . [such has been] *sunnat Allāh* which has gone before (*khalat*) among His servants, and the *kāfirūn* were the losers in that."

Q 48:23 comes after a recital of God's past and future signs to, and protection of, the Prophet and the certain failure of his opponents: "[Such has been] *sunnat Allāh* which has gone before, and you will find no *tabdīl* to God's *sunnah*."

The Exegesis

By definition, *sunnah* is a legacy of the past. Most exegetes gloss these passages with vocabulary pertaining to vanished nations, even though none of the *sunnah* verses in the Qur'an comes at the end of a recital of ignored prophets and peoples gone before. It is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss exegetical material in detail.

Whatever the *tafsīr* being used, much of the *sunnah* material will be found in the exegesis of Q 3:137, since that is the first occurrence, and much of that will refer to the fate of vanished nations, because of the presence of the travel-in-the-earth formula. The word *sunan* is variously glossed as: punishment of the unbelievers (*'adhāb*);⁷ reward (*thawāb*) and punishment for repentance and the lack of it;⁸ signs (*a'lām*: Abū 'Ubaydah,⁹ always the maverick); nations (*umam*); exemplary punishments (*mu-*

⁷Al Ṭabarī (1388/1968), IV, p. 99.

⁸Al Fīrūzābādī (1382/1962) quoting Ibn 'Abbās. Much of the material here is spurious, but this passage is less doubtful than some.

⁹Sezgin (1955), I, p. 103.

thulāt sīra bihā fihim);¹⁰ an abbreviation for *ahl sunan*;¹¹ and as the alternation (*tadāwul*) between believers and unbelievers in good and evil.¹² Al Ṭabarī defines *sunnah* as an example to be followed, set by an imam. Al Ṭabarsī notes that the origin is “continuing in a particular direction” (*al istimrār fī jihah*) and quotes al Kalbī to the effect that every ummah has had a sunnah and a *minhaj*, “which, if they followed them, God was pleased with them.” Let us remember how full the Qur’an is of path-imagery: *sabīl* (166 occurrences, plus 10 in the plural); *ṣirāt* (45 occurrences); *sunnah* (14, plus 2 in the plural); *sharī’ah* (1 occurrence at Q 46:18); *tarīq* (4); and *tarīqah* (3, plus 2 in the plural); and *minhaj* (1, in conjunction with *shir’a*). All of these occurrences are potential sources of sunnah-material, as are such parallel passages as Q 43:8: “So We destroyed [people] stronger than these in power; thus the example of the people of old has gone before” (*maḍā mathalu al awwalīn* instead of *maḍat sunnat al awwalīn* as in 8:38), to cite only one example of many.

The exegesis of the two verses that come in passages dealing with marriage gives us more synonyms. Q 4:26 is held to refer to the incestuous marriage customs of previous nations (al Ṭabarī, “Ibn ‘Abbās,” al Suyūṭī), and so a bit of legal vocabulary begins to appear: *sharā’i*; *tahrīm* (Ibn Sulaymān 1969); *subul* (Abū ‘Ubaydah); but some say *sunan* refers to these customs themselves, others to God’s ban on these customs. The glossed version of the verse would then be something like “God wishes to make clear to you and show you His ban on the *sunan* of those before you and to turn to you . . .” (Q 33:38), referring to the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh. This evokes from al Ṭabarsī a comparison with God’s way (*tarīqah* and *sharī’ah*) of providing earlier prophets, specifically Dāwūd and Sulaymān, with special marital privileges. Al Suyūṭī records that Ibn Sa’d said that it is God’s *farīdah*—another synonym—that prophets marry whom they want.

Part of the vanished-nations topos is the theme of behavior of the prophets’ opponents and God’s abandonment of them. Q 8:38 is said to refer to the day of Badr, so *sunnat al awwalīn* includes both the Quraysh and earlier nations. According to al Ṭabarī, Q 3:137 was consolation on the day of Uhud. In Q 15:13, *sunnat al awwalīn* means *sīrat al awwalīn* (“Ibn ‘Abbās”); or it means *waqā’i* ‘*Allāh fī man khalā min al umam* (God’s measures regarding the peoples gone before—al Suyūṭī)—two

¹⁰Al Ṭabarī (1388/1968), IV, p. 99.

¹¹Al Ṭabarsī (1333 AH), I, p. 507.

¹²Al Suyūṭī (1970), II, p. 78.

more synonyms. Q 17:77 is said to address the Makkan opposition to the Prophet (al Ṭabarī), and Q 33:62 the activity of the *munāfiqīn* ("Ibn 'Abbās") in Madīnah.

It appears that references to the fate of vanished nations were very much in the minds of Muslim commanders. After the battle of Qādisīyah in 17/637, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ wrote to 'Umar that "God has given us victory over the people of Persia, and granted them the *sunan* of their co-religionists before them, after a long war and a violent upset" (Ḥamīd Allāh n.d.).

An interesting application of the concept of *sunnat Allāh* can be found not in the exegesis of the *sunnah* verses themselves, but in discussions of the sin of Cain. A propos Q 5:31, in which Cain learns from a crow the custom of burying the dead, al Ṭabarī explains: "The one of the two who killed his brother didn't know God's *sunnah* with regard to custom of [how one treats] the dead, so God sent the crow to teach him."

Documents That Mention the Sunnah of God

According to Schacht, the earliest document containing an authentic use of the phrase *sunnat al nabī* (*sunnah* of the Prophet) is the letter of Ibn Ibād to the caliph 'Abd al Mālik, dating from 76/695. This text, however, also mentions *divine* *sunnah* (al Dammārī 1302 AH). Ibn Ibād remarks that the imams of error, about whom God revealed verses Q 28:41, Q 25:52, and Q 18:28, judge by other than God's revelation and follow their own desires without a *sunnah* from God. Ḥasan al Basrī, in his letter on *qadar* (fate) sent to the same caliph, quotes Q 40:85, concerning the ineffectiveness of believing only when one sees one's punishment with one's own eyes. He says: "This is God's *sunnah*: not to accept repentance that comes upon witnessing the punishment" (Ritter 1933). Schacht notes that neither of these documents contains a single hadith and that the *sunnah* referred to by Ibn Ibād comes from God and is precisely the Prophet's following the Qur'an. This makes it all the more curious that he neglects the Qur'anic material.

Perhaps historians can speculate as to why correspondence with 'Abd al Mālik so often moved the letter-writer to use the term in question (Cook [1981] has identified "the letter to 'Abd al Mālik" as "almost a subgenre in itself"). We have another example in the *Muwattā*, where Mālik (n.d.) quotes the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) of 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar to the caliph 'Abd al Mālik: *uqirru laka bi al sam' wa al tā'ah 'alā sunnat Allāh wa sunnat rasūlih fīmā istaṭa'tu* ("I affirm to you that I will heed and obey according to the *sunnah* of God and the *sunnah* of His Prophet, insofar as I am able").

Imām al Shāfi‘ī (1403/1983) uses *sunnat Allāh* when talking about the proper performance of hajj: *fa bi hadhā qulnā inna sunnat Allāh fi ‘ibādih ‘an lā yudkhal al haram illā ihrām*. This follows a passage about Adam’s hajj, Abraham’s hajj, and so on, and various Qur’anic verses on the hajj. So the hajj is both Qur’an and sunnah. In fact, al Tabarī and Ibn Hishām (Hamīd Allāh n.d.) quote a letter from the Prophet to the gover-nor of Yemen, ‘Amr ibn Hazm al Anṣārī, containing the phrase *ma’ālim al hajj wa sunnatih wa farīdatih* but making no reference to *sunnat al rasūl*. I suggest that those who doubt, for whatever reason, that the Pro-phet spoke of *sunnat al rasūl* as something with a separate identity might have less trouble with his using the word *sunnah* for a discrete and pre-viously existing phenomenon external to himself, such as the hajj.

In the passage from *Kitāb al Umm*, al Shāfi‘ī’s concern is whether it is permissible to perfume oneself before entering *ihrām*, based by analogy upon a *sunnah*. The Prophet directed a Bedouin making the ‘*umrah* to remove and wash the perfume-spotted garment in which he had entered *ihrām*, after determining that he had also washed his garment dur-ing the hajj: “What you did in your hajj, do in your ‘*umrah*.” If the problem was that the spots were not ordinary dirt but perfume, that hadith is from the year 8 AH, according to al Shāfi‘ī, while a hadith from

‘Ā’ishah that she perfumed the Prophet before *ihrām* dates from the year 10 AH and so supersedes it. ‘Umar banned perfume, but al Shāfi‘ī says that the information from ‘Ā’ishah is better attested, that a dictum from the Prophet can be contradicted only by another dictum from the Prophet, and that there are others who contradict ‘Umar, who also contradicts him-self. In conclusion, al Shāfi‘ī says: “So how can it be permissible to abandon the *sunnah* which Almighty Allah has required humanity to fol-low, at a word from someone who talks that way?”

There are *ahādīth* containing the phrase *sunnat Allāh*. Wensinck’s (1936) concordance lists such *ahādīth* in the collections of al Bukhārī, Ibn Hanbal, and Ibn Mājah. One of Ibn Hanbal’s examples says: “*Sunnat Allāh ta’ālā wa rasūlih ahāqq ‘an tuttaba’ min sunnat Ibn Fulān*” (“The sunnah of Allah Almighty and of His Prophet are more worthy of being followed than the sunnah of so-and-so”). But as Schacht (1950) remarks, hadith is not identical with sunnah. Ḥasan (1970), who accuses Schacht of “perhaps purposely” refraining from quoting the Qur’an on the subject, points out that hadith is not the only vehicle of sunnah. In any case, it is an interesting endeavor to discuss sunnah without relying exclusively on hadith.

Where the scholar would perhaps be best advised to consider apply-ing the notion of the “sunnah of God” is in analyzing the many, many texts which speak of “a sunnah” or “the sunnah” without making it clear whose sunnah it is. For every text with a clear reference to the sunnah of

God, it seems there are dozens that contain the word unascribed. Some of these texts are also hadith, including items in Mālik, al Dārimī, Abū Dāwūd, and Ibn Mājah. Nonprophetic material includes such famous texts as 'Umar's letter to Abū Mūsā al Ash'arī (Ḥamīd Allāh n.d.), which mentions sunnah twice—first in the phrase *sunnah muttaba'ah* and second in the phrase *min mā laysa fih Qur'ān wa lā sunnah*. In other words, both instances of the word are unascribed and undefined. Of the seventeen recensions of the letter consulted by Ḥamīd Allāh (ibid.) for his compendium of political documents, only three—those of al Jāhiz, al Māwardī, and Ibn 'Abd Rabbih—say *sunnat al nabī* or *sunnat nabīyih*. In *Kitāb al Irijā'*, al Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al Ḥanafīyah (van Ess 1974) refers constantly to the vanished nations, in which context he mentions *al sunnah* three times, along with such associated notions as *maḍat*, *khalat*, *subul*, and so on, but does not actually use the phrase *sunnat Allāh*. As with 'Umar's letter, textual variants often consist precisely of the difference between, say, *al sunnah* and *sunnat al nabī*, or between *al kitāb wa al sunnah* and *kitāb Allāh wa sunnat nabīyih*.

In conclusion, consider three of the letters ascribed to 'Alī. The first two are numbers 487 and 519 from Safwat's (1356/1937) collection and are also in Ibn Abī al Ḥadīd. Among all the stylistic anachronisms, we find the phrase *'allamahum* (or *'allamakum*) *al kitāb wa al hikmah wa al farā'id wa al sunnah* (or *al sunan*). Now, there may certainly be a core of genuine material in these two letters, but aside from the Qur'anic formula *al kitāb wa al hikmah*, it is probably not these phrases, which exhibit the priorities of a later period. The third letter, number 466, is from 'Alī to some of the Khawārij. Safwat quotes it from al Ṭabarī and Ibn Qutaybah but not from *Nahj al Balāghah*, nor could I find it there. It is a terse indictment of the two arbiters at Šiffīn, who "went against the book of God, followed their own desires without any guidance from God, did not act according to the *sunnah*, and gave the Qur'an no role in the decision." The order of references—Qur'an, Qur'an (= *hudā*), *sunnah*, Qur'an—is contrary to the later habit of mentioning *sunnah* after Qur'an. On that basis, I would argue that the text has as good a claim as any to authenticity, and that the reference is not to the practice of the Prophet or that of the community, but rather to the *sunnah* of God.

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