

Three Definitions of 'as-Sunnah'

The technical definition of '**as-Sunnah**' may differ in consideration of the differing goals or purpose of the research of various scholars depending upon their different areas of specialty. In what follows are the definitions of '**as-Sunnah**' according to **al-Muhadditheen** (the scholars of 'Hadeeth'), **al-Usooleeyeen** (the scholars of 'Fundamentals of Law') and **al-Fuqahaa'** (the scholars of 'Islamic Jurisprudence').

'As-Sunnah' in the technical language of **al-Muhadditheen** (the scholars of 'Hadeeth'):

It is the **Aq-waal** (sayings) of the Messenger of Allaah (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam), his **Af'aal** (actions), his **Taq-ree-raat** (approvals); his **Si-faat Khal-qee-yah** (physical characteristics) and his **Si-faat Khu-lu-qee-yah** (moral characteristics); as well as the rest of his **Akh-baar** (news about his life), regardless of whether it was from his life *before* being missioned as a prophet or *after* it.

This is what is well known among the majority of the scholars of Hadeeth. It is as though the 'Sunnah', in their view, is *particular* to that which has been reported in **Marfoo' Hadeeth** (attributed to the Prophet, SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam), to the *exclusion* of **al-Mawqoof** (sayings, actions of *Sahaabah*) and **al-Maqtoo'** (sayings, actions of *Taabi'oon*, students of *Sahaabah*).

It is based upon this view that many of the scholars of Hadeeth have named their collections of Hadeeth '**Sunan**' (i.e. plural of Sunnah). Examples of this are: Sunan at-Tirmidhee (d. 279), Sunan Abi Daawood as-Sijistaanee (d. 275), Sunan an-Nasaa'ee (d. 303) and Sunan Ibn Maajah (d. 273 or 275).

In summary, the scholars of Hadeeth directed their research towards the Messenger of Allaah (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) as the '**Rightly Guided Imaam**' whom Allaah described as the **Us-wah** (model) and **Qud-wah** (example) for all Muslims. Hence, they transmitted *everything* that is related to the Prophet (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam), including his Seerah (biography) and Akhlaaq (moral characteristics), his Shamaa'il (physical characteristics) and Akhbaar (other information about his life), his Aqwaal (sayings) and Af'aal (actions) – regardless of whether it establishes a **Hukm Shar'ee** (legal ruling) or not.

'As-Sunnah' in the technical language of **al-Usooleeyeen** (scholars of '**Usool**', i.e. 'Fundamentals of Law'):

It is the **Aq-waal** (sayings) of the Prophet (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) – other than the Qur'aan - his **Af'aal** (actions), and his **Taq-ree-raat** (approvals) which may possibly be used as a *Daleel* (evidence) for a **Hukm Shar'ee** (legal ruling).

It is as though whatever sayings, actions and approvals were reported from him (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam), **but were considered to be from his Kha-saa'-is** (matters exclusive to him, and not allowed for others) – are **not** included in the definition of 'Sunnah' according to the Usooleeyeen (scholars of 'Fundamentals of Law').

Similarly, the **Sifaat** (characteristics) of the Prophet (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) are **not** included in their definition of 'Sunnah' since they are not a basis for establishing a **Hukm Shar'ee** (legal ruling) which can be used by the people in worship.

For this reason, you will find the Usooleeyeen usually do not give attention, in their speech, to matters which are from the **Kha-saa-'is** (exclusive matters) of the Prophet (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam). And those among them who do talk about these affairs only intend by it to clarify the point that the Muslims are not obligated to follow these matters.

In summary, the Usooleeyeen (scholars of 'Fundamentals of Law') directed their research towards the Messenger of Allaah (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) in his capacity as **al-Mu-shar-ri'** (the Law-Giver) who laid down **al-Qa-waa-'id** (the broad-based 'fundamental' principles) to be used by the **Muj-ta-hi-doon** scholars [who are qualified to make *independent* decisions, based upon the *sources* of law] who would come after him (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam).

Hence, they were only concerned with his (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) sayings, actions and approvals which establish and confirm **al-Ahkaam** (legal rulings).

'As-Sunnah' in the technical language of al-Fuqahaa' (the scholars of Fiqh, i.e. 'Islamic Jurisprudence'):

1. It is everything that is confirmed from the Prophet (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam)[of his sayings, actions and approvals] which is not **Fard** (obligatory) or **Waajib** (compulsory). For example, washing the parts of the body for ablution *three times*, and rinsing the mouth and nose – according to some of them, and giving the *right* precedence over the *left*, and performing *two Rak'ah* before the obligatory congregational dawn prayer, etc.

2. Sometimes the scholars of Islamic Jurisprudence use this expression ('**Sunnah**'), intending by it that which is the **opposite** of **Bid'ah** (innovation); like the one who divorces his wife *outside* of the time of her menses, and *outside* of the time when she is clean from menses, but when they have enjoyed marital relations. They call this **Talaaq Sunnee** (a divorce in accordance with the Sunnah); as opposed to **Talaaq Bid'ee** (a divorce contrary to the Sunnah) which occurs during a time when the wife is clean from menses, but during that time they enjoyed marital relations; or the divorce which occurs during the period of the woman's menses.

In summary, **al-Fuqahaa'** (the scholars of 'Islamic Jurisprudence') directed their research towards the Messenger of Allaah (SallAllaahu Alaihi wa Sallam) - with regard to his actions which indicate a **Hukm Shar'ee** (legal ruling), in their search for the **position** of the **Sharee'ah** (divine law) concerning the actions of the people – as to whether it is **Waajib** (compulsory), **Haraam** (forbidden), **Mubaah** (permissible, allowed) or other than that.