

CHAPTER ONE

The Status of the Sunnah in Islam

I

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUNNAH

The Qur'an is the supreme sign and the greatest miracle of Muhammad (ṢAAS),¹ the preserved everlasting Book, into which falsehood cannot enter from any direction. Its permanency from first to last makes it the primary fixed source validating all the sources of Islam and its further secondary proofs – one never argues from the latter to validate it. The Sunnah of the Prophet comes as a source following along with the Qur'an and making it clear, as God said, addressing His Messenger: "We have sent down to you the Remembrance so that you make clear to humankind what has been sent down for them" (*al-Nahl*, 16: 44). Through the Prophet's sayings, his actions and his acceptance (*taqrīr*),² the Sunnah functions as the practical exegesis of the Qur'an, the application in reality, as well as the ideal, of Islam. In sum, the Sunnah is the Qur'an interpreted and Islam embodied. 'Ā'ishah (RAA),³ through her understanding and insight, and her living in the household of God's Messenger, was aware of this, and gave expression to it in a brilliant turn of phrase. When asked about his character, she said: "His character was the Qur'an!"⁴

Whoever desires to know the practical way of Islam, in its particulars and its pillars, should therefore know it as elaborated and embodied in the Prophet's Sunnah. The term *sunnah* means 'way' or 'method' or 'pattern'. It represents the Wisdom of the Prophet, in explaining the Qur'an, in commenting on the truths of

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Islam, and in his teaching of the Community.⁵ God revealed to His Messenger “the Book and the Wisdom”, both; and He made conveying that Wisdom one of his most important duties in the formative life of the Community.

A COMPREHENSIVE PATTERN

God said: “And we sent down to you the Book as a clarification of everything” (*al-Nahl*, 16: 89). Accordingly, the Sunnah is a pattern distinguished by its comprehensiveness and completeness in relation to the whole of human life in all its dimensions, ‘length’, ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’. We mean by ‘length’ the temporal or vertical dimension, from birth to death, indeed from the embryonic stage to what comes after death. By ‘breadth’ we mean the horizontal dimension, which comprehends all spheres of life. The Prophet’s guidance proceeds with all of them: in the home, in the market-place, in the mosque, on the road, at work; in relations with God, with oneself, with family, with Muslims, non-Muslims, and human-kind generally, with animate creatures and inanimate things. We mean by ‘depth’ the deeper dimensions of human life, but this covers body as well as mind and spirit, the outward as well as the inward, and it embraces speech and action as well as intention.

Unfortunately, some Muslims hardly know anything of the Sunnah except keeping the beard long and the robe short, and using the *siwāk* from the *arāk* tree to clean the teeth. They forget the comprehensiveness of the Prophetic pattern, in which everyone, however different their conditions or circumstances, can find scope for something to serve as their model.

A BALANCED METHOD

The Sunnah is distinguished also by balance – between spirit and body, mind and heart, this world and the hereafter, the ideal and the actual, theory and practice, the unseen and the visible, freedom and responsibility, individualism and collectivism, conformity and inventiveness... So it has to be and is a moderate pattern for a

moderate society, with neither overdoing in it nor doing too little. God commanded: “That you do not exceed the measure, but establish the measure with equity, and do not fall short of the balance” (*al-Rahmān*, 55: 8–9).

When the Prophet caught sight of any among his Companions inclining towards either extreme, he turned them back firmly to moderation, and cautioned them against the consequences of excess or insufficiency. He disapproved the three men who questioned his worship as if they disdained it and their appetite for acts of devotion was not satisfied. One of them resolved that he would fast for life and not break his fast; another that he would stand in vigil for the night and not rest; the third that he would keep apart from women and not marry. When their saying so was reported to him, he said: “Be aware! I am more fearful of God than you, more God-aware than you, yet I fast and I break fast, I stand in vigil and I rest, and I marry women. Then whoever prefers [something else] above my *sunnah* is not one of mine.”⁶ On seeing the excess of ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr in fasting, keeping vigil and recitation of the Qur’an, he returned him to moderation, saying: “Indeed, your body owns a right over you (that is, of relaxation), your eyes own a right over you (that is, of sleep), your family own a right over you (that is, of everyday pleasures and sociability), and your visitor owns a right over you (that is, of hospitality and companionship).”⁷ In other words: give to every owner of a right his right.

The Prophet himself set the highest standard of balance and moderation throughout his life – as demonstrated by his Sunnah and the history of his life – with his Lord, with his self, with his family, with his Companions, and with people as a whole. Most often what he prayed for was in the Qur’anic invocation: “Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and save us from the punishment of the Fire” (*al-Baqarah*, 2: 201). Among his prayers was: “O God, set right my religion, which is the protection of my affair; set right for me my world, wherein is my life and livelihood; and set right for me my hereafter, to which

is my return; and make my life prosper for me by every good; and make my death a rest from every evil.”⁸

AN INTEGRATIVE WAY

The Sunnah of the Prophet is a harmonizing or *integrative* way. It integrates within itself faith with intellection, or revelation with reason, so that from both of them there flows “light upon light” (*al-Nūr*, 24: 35). It combines also legislation and moral instruction. The Sunnah is involved in the forming, foundation and direction of instruction. In legislation, it is involved in defence, the application of force, discipline and punishment. Moral instruction is of little avail without the support of legislation; and legislation is of little avail without moral guidance. The Prophet was responsible for both together.

The Sunnah integrates within itself might and right, the authority of the state with the Qur’an, the call to religion. For indeed God restrains by that authority what he does not restrain by the Qur’an. If good conscience of the right does not prevent some people from wrongdoing, then might can prevent them, and whoever rebels against this call, the state can discipline. For every situation there is a limit of tolerance beyond which it is not permitted that it be overrun by the false. The Messenger held together the call to religion and the power of state: he it was who led the people in the prayer, and on the battlefield; who judged between them in disputes, and led them in administration in peace and in war. He was not as the Israelites were at certain stages in their progress – a prophet guiding them and leading in the call to religion, with a king administering and leading in their affairs of state – as the Qur’an has narrated to us that their prophet said to the Israelites: “God has raised for you Saul as king” (*al-Baqarah*, 2: 247).

Nor has there come about the Prophet in the Islamic tradition, what has come about the Messiah, regarding the partitioning of life (and responsibilities) between God and Caesar, so that the religion is for God, and for Caesar political power. Rather, God informed him so that he said: “My prayer, my sacrifice, my living and my

dying are for God, the Lord of the worlds. He has no partner (or peer). By that am I commanded, and I am the first of those who surrender (to God)” (*al-An‘ām*, 6: 163–64).

Thus the Community was administered and its life guided in its entirety by the Book and the Balance. Whoever rebelled against either was disciplined, as God said, by “iron” of “mighty strength”: “We sent our Messengers with the clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that people should establish just measure, and We sent down iron in which are mighty strength and benefits for people” (*al-Hadīd*, 57: 25). Ibn Taymiyyah said: “People must have a book to guide, and iron to support. ‘And God suffices as Guide and Helper’ (*al-Furqān*, 25: 31).”

The leadership and the people are also brought together. The leader is not as an angelic being circling in the sky, but a human being dwelling on earth. Nor is it desirable for the leader to live in a hermitage secluded from the people. Rather, it is incumbent upon him to be with and among them, sharing in their sorrows and joys, their crises and troubles. That is indeed how the Prophet was. In times of scarcity he was the first to go hungry and the last to satisfy his appetite; in battle he was at the front of the ranks; in the prayer he was the people’s leader; and in manners their model. When a stranger came, he could not distinguish the Messenger among the people and so he asked: “Which of you is Muhammad?” When the people were constructing the mosque and hauling stones, he hauled with them, sharing with them his toil in the building, so that some of them said:

If we sit while the Prophet labors, it will be reprehensible on our part.

In the shade of this pattern the believers are united in order to make their society what it seeks to be, to make it the ideal, so that they may proclaim their message to the world. This important task is demanded of them collectively, with solidarity and mutual agreement, each in his place, and each according to his capacity: the learned one gives freely of his knowledge, the rich one of his wealth, the one who has celebrity of his celebrity, and each from

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whatever he has of power or ability gives freely according to his means: and God does not burden a soul except with what He has given it. The responsibility of the weaker ones among the people is honored, drawing the stronger among them to help the others, and together they are a help against whoever is other than them. So they are friends of one another, as God said: “And the believing men and the believing women are friends of one another, they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish the prayer and pay the alms-tax (zakah), and they obey God and His Messenger. On those God will have mercy” (*al-Tawbah*, 9: 71).

A REALISTIC METHOD

The Sunnah is also a realistic method. It does not regard people as if they were winged angels, but as human beings who eat food and live in the markets, who have their dispositions and passions, their necessities and their needs – just as they also have elevated spiritual aspirations and are elevated by them to the host of heaven. They were created from clay and molded mud, but also there is in them a breath from the spirit of God. Little wonder then that a human being ascends and descends, that he makes progress and he stumbles, that he is guided and goes astray, that he stands firm and he deviates, that he disobeys God and he repents.

One of the Companions supposed that he had become a hypocrite because his state when at home was at variance with his state when in the presence of the Messenger. He rushed out till he reached God’s Messenger and said: “Ḥanzalah has become a hypocrite.” He explained to the Messenger this ‘hypocrisy’ in that, when he was with him, his heart was softened, and his eyes moistened with tears, and he remembered his Lord, and the hereafter was present to him as if he saw it with his eyes. Then, when he returned to his house, he joked with his children, and played with his wife, and he would forget the state that he was in before. Then the Messenger said: “O Ḥanzalah! If you were able to endure in the state you are in [when] with me, angels would be shaking

hands with you on the roads. But, O Ḥanzalah, there is a time [for this] and a time [for that].”⁹

It is a familiar fact that the human being is lucid and clear, then dozes and nods off. There is no harm in that if his time and life are apportioned between what is good for himself and the right of his Lord, or between this world and the hereafter, as is said in the proverbial saying: ‘An hour for your heart, and an hour for your Lord.’

In recognition of that, the Sunnah makes allowance for human weakness. It widens the circle of the permitted and narrows that of the forbidden, as in the hadith: “What God has made lawful in His Book, that is lawful; and what He has forbidden, that is forbidden; and what He is silent about, that is exempt [from ruling]. So accept from God His latitude. For surely God never is forgetful of any thing.” Then he recited: “And your Lord is never forgetful” (*Maryam*, 19: 64).¹⁰ In further recognition of human weakness, the Sunnah makes permissible, according to circumstances, the necessities among those things normally restricted. It even makes permissible according to necessity certain of those things normally forbidden: for example, the Messenger permitted to two of his Companions the wearing of silk in light of their complaining of a skin ailment.

The Sunnah makes allowance for the reality of the human being and it relents for him when he lapses into disobedience. It does not close the door in the face of repentance. Rather, it opens it wide before him so that he can knock on that door, repentant and remorseful before his Lord. As in the hadith: “God spreads out His hands through the night so that He may accept repentance for the offences of the day; and He spreads out His hands through the day so that He may accept repentance for the offences of the night – until the sun rises in the west.”¹¹ And in another: “By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, if you do not sin and seek forgiveness, He will remove you, and bring [instead] a people who do sin and seek His forgiveness, and He will forgive them.”¹²

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The Sunnah makes allowance for the different conditions of human beings, and the differences between them, whether innate or acquired. In consideration of such differences the Messenger would answer a single question from a number of persons with multiple answers – so he did not apply to an old man a ruling on the matter (*mu‘āmilah*) appropriate to a youth; or to someone in conditions of necessity a ruling appropriate to one in abundance and enjoying freedom of action. Similarly, he considered the customs of peoples and their diversity: so he let the Abyssinians play with their spears in his mosque on the day of ‘Id; and he let ‘A’ishah watch them from behind his shoulder. In the same way he urged the girls to come and play with her, as a concession to her being young. So too he made lawful entertainments at weddings, and at celebrations for the return of someone long absent, and other such occasions, as a concession to the need of human beings for amusement and recreation.¹³

The realities engaged by the Sunnah are too many for examples to encompass them. But all of them inform us of the realism of this divine Prophetic pattern.

A WAY MADE EASY

Another of the special, distinguishing qualities of the way of the Sunnah is its facility, its convenience and tolerance. Among the virtues of this Messenger mentioned in the earlier scriptures, in the Torah and the Gospel, are that he “will enjoin on them that which is right and forbid them that which is wrong; he will make lawful for them the good things and make prohibited for them the foul things; and he will release them from their burdens and from the fetters that were upon them” (*al-A‘raf*, 7: 157). So nothing exists in the Sunnah of this Prophet that hinders the people in their religious life (*dīn*), or oppresses them in their worldly life (*dunyā*). Rather, he says about himself: “Indeed I am a mercy proffered [to you]”,¹⁴ interpreting the verse: “And We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds” (*al-Anbiyā’*, 21: 107). He said: “Assuredly God did not commission me for affliction, nor for bringing

affliction to others; on the contrary, He commissioned me as an educator and as a means of ease for others.”¹⁵

He dispatched Abū Mūsā and Mu‘ādh to the Yemen with a succinct, comprehensive instruction: “Urge ease, and do not urge hardship; offer good hope [lit. glad tidings], and do not provoke aversion; listen to one another, and do not provoke differences.”¹⁶

By way of teaching his Community, he said: “Urge ease, and do not urge hardship; offer good hope, and do not provoke aversion.”¹⁷ To his Companions, after they became agitated with a Bedouin who had urinated in the mosque, he said: “You are commissioned as people who make things easy, not as those who make things hard.”¹⁸ And about his Messengership, he said: “Assuredly I have been commissioned [to impart] a tolerant true-religion.”¹⁹ He said: “O people! [what is incumbent] upon you is actions that you can bear. For surely God does not tire [cease to persevere] until you tire [cease to persevere].”²⁰

The Prophet made things easy in light of the pattern of the Qur’an, which proclaims that God desires ease for His slaves, not hardship, and that He did not lay upon them, in their religious duties, any distress. Thus, He said in the conclusion of the verse of purification: “God does not desire to lay upon you any distress” (*al-Mā’idah*, 5: 6); and after the verses on the forbidden degrees in marriage: “God desires to make (the observance of His decrees) light for you, for man was created weak” (*al-Nisā’*, 4: 28).

So the Prophet warned against pedantry and excess in the religion. It is why he did not prescribe celibacy and seclusion from the world or prohibit the good things of life. Rather, he called for the enjoyment of life with balance. He said: “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.”²¹ “God loves to see traces of His favors on His servant.”²² He prescribed concessions and making duties lighter in the rites of purification, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. So he prescribed *tayammum* in place of *wuḍū’*; he prescribed the shortening and the combining of prayers; and the prayer sitting or lying down or by gesture, depending on the ailment and the person’s capacity; and he prescribed breaking the fast in Ramadan for the

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invalid and the traveler, for the pregnant woman and the wet-nurse. He said in the case of the man who saw people shading him and spraying him with water while traveling: “There is no virtue in fasting while traveling,”²³ that is, while traveling in the kind of journey that is strenuous and exhausting.

He permitted the combining of the *ẓuhr* and *‘aṣr* and the *maḡrib* and *‘iṣhā’* prayers while in Madinah and without their being constraining circumstances such as traveling or rain. When Ibn ‘Abbās, the narrator of the hadith, was asked: “What did he intend by that?” He said: “He intended to not distress his Community.”²⁴ In other words, he purposed to lift the distress from his Community. He said: “God loves that you act according to His indulgence, just as He hates that you act in disobedience to Him.”²⁵ And: “God loves that you act according to His indulgence, just as He loves that you [act according to] His decrees.”²⁶

Once, some of his Companions complained to him that ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ had fallen into *janābah* (the state of major ritual impurity) and then prayed with them after doing *tayammum* but not taking a bath. When he asked ‘Amr about that he said that the night had been severely cold, adding: “And I had in mind God’s saying, Exalted is He: ‘And do not kill yourselves – surely God is ever-merciful to you’ (*al-Nisā’*, 4: 29).” On hearing this, God’s Messenger smiled – an indication of his acceptance of ‘Amr’s action.

In another incident: a man suffered wounds, then he fell into *janābah*. Some people ruled for him that he be given a bath in spite of his wounds; his condition was aggravated as a result, and he died. When the Prophet was informed, he said: “They killed him! May God kill them! Why do they not ask when they do not know? For the only cure for witlessness is asking a question.”²⁷

II

THE MUSLIMS’ DUTY TO THE SUNNAH

The Sunnah of the Prophet is, as we said, the detailed pattern for the life of the individual Muslim and of the Muslim society, and

represents the Qur'an interpreted, and Islam embodied in life. Among the Muslims' duties is that they should know this detailed Prophetic pattern, with its distinguishing features, namely its comprehensiveness and completeness, its balance, its realism, and its facility. They should know what is clearly displayed therein of the virtues of deep-rooted piety, noble humanity, and authentic morals. And they should take him as the good example to follow in the entirety of their lives:

Assuredly there is in the Messenger a good example for one who anticipates with hope God and the Last Day and remembers God much. (*al-Aḥzāb*, 33: 21)

And whatever the Messenger gives to you, take hold of it, and whatever he forbids you from, reject it. (*al-Ḥashr*, 59: 7)

Say: If indeed you love God then follow me. God will love you and forgive you your sins. (*Āl-Imrān*, 3: 31)

This makes it incumbent on Muslims to learn how to become proficient in insight into this Sunnah, how to apply it, with understanding and proper decorum, as the best generations of this Community applied it, who studied in the school of Muhammad, the Companions and their Successors, with sincerity. They excelled in learning, thereafter they put into action what they learned, and they excelled in action, thereafter they taught the leaders of Islam, and they excelled in teaching.

The foremost crisis facing the Muslims in this time is the crisis in thought. In my opinion it takes precedence over the crisis in conscience. It is always the thought that sets bounds to perception and sketches out the way. Then comes movement, after that, reconciling perception with what the thought sketched out. What most clearly represents that crisis in thought is the crisis in insight into the Sunnah and in application of it. This is especially the case among some movements in the Islamic re-awakening. The more discerning are looking to those movements and hanging their hopes upon them, and the heads of the Community the world over are turned toward them in expectation. Often, those movements present issues from the direction of their wrong under-

standing of the Sunnah. Their view of it is a deficient view. It all but limits the Sunnah to outward shows and formalisms, without penetrating to the understanding of the wisdom of the Prophetic pattern, whose special qualities we recounted earlier.

WARNING AGAINST THREE EVILS

It is narrated from the Messenger that he indicated that knowledge of Prophethood and the legacy of the Message would be targeted by extremists, and by falsifiers and by the ignorant. This has come in what Ibn Jarīr narrated, also Tammām in his *Fawā'id*, and Ibn 'Adī, and others, from the Prophet. He said: "From every generation its just and upright [ones] will carry this knowledge, expelling from it the distortion of the extremists, the deviation of the falsifiers, and the interpretation of the ignorant."²⁸ Those are indeed three destructive sledgehammers, each a danger to the Prophet's legacy.

a) The distortion of the extremists

Distortion originates in extremism and obduracy, in shunning the moderation which distinguishes this religion, the tolerance which is an attribute of this righteous community, and the facility which characterizes the obligations in the Law. It is extremism that, before us, destroyed the People of the Book, some of whom went to excess in matters of creed, or of worship, or of conduct. They expelled from the religion its facility, prescribed what God never urged, and prohibited what God made lawful, thus burdening people with obligations and covenants that God never made incumbent on them. The Qur'an recorded that against them when it said: "Say: 'O People of the Book, do not go to extremes in your religion without right; and do not follow the caprices of a nation that certainly went astray before and caused many to stray, and strayed from the level path'" (*al-Mā'idah*, 5: 77).

Ibn 'Abbās narrated from the Prophet: "Beware yourselves against extremism in the religion, for certainly those before you were destroyed by extremism in religion."²⁹ Ibn Mas'ūd narrated

from him that he said, and said three times: "The obdurate were destroyed."³⁰

What is noteworthy here is that the hadith deems extremism to be distorting the religion. That is because it turns it away from its characteristic temperament of ease, facility and moderation to another temperament, burdening the people to excess and bringing hardship upon them.

b) The deviations of falsifiers

The deviations are those to which the falsifiers resorted in order to bring into the Prophetic pattern what is not of it, and to attach to it certain novelties and innovations which its temperament does not accept, its creed and its Law strongly reject, and its roots and branches shy away from. Now the falsifiers proved incapable of adding anything to the Qur'an, since it has been memorized by the hearts, inscribed in the written copies, and recited by the tongues, of the believers. So they reckoned their route to deviations in the Sunnah would be smooth, that it would be possible for them to say 'the Messenger of God said' without any evidence.

But the critical scholars of the Community and guardians of the Sunnah lay in wait for them at every lookout, and shut up against them every loophole leading to deviations. They did not accept a hadith without a *sanad* (chain of narrators, pl. *isnād*), and without scrutinizing its narrators one by one until his person and character were known from birth to death. They would find out about his teachers, associates and students. They would evaluate his trustworthiness and fear of God (*taqwā*), his exactitude in preserving what he heard, his consonance with trusted well-known reports, and the quality of his solitary reports on unfamiliar matters.

For this reason the scholars said: "The *isnād* is part of the religion." For, without an *isnād*, whoever wished might say whatever he wished! They likened seeking knowledge without seeking its *isnād* to 'looking for firewood in the dark'. So they did not accept any hadith except that whose *sanad* was thoroughly connected from its beginning to its end, reliably so, and from fair-

minded narrators with exactitude in preserving what came to them, with no gaps evident or hidden, and with the requirement of its being safe from all irregularity or defect or objectionable content.

This exactitude in the quest for the *isnād*, with its criteria and its qualifications, is among the special qualities of the Community of the Muslims. They were far ahead of contemporary civilization in that it was they who established the foundations of the methodology of scientific history.

However, what is regrettable is that the Community circulated false hadiths without source and *isnād*. It is regrettable also that the knowledgeable scholars were adjudged to have been fabricating or falsifying them. Moreover, this became common currency among the general public. For example, the hadiths such as those about women, like: “the burial alive of daughters is among the honorable actions”; and “consult with [women], then oppose them”; and “do not allocate upper-story rooms for [women] and do not teach them writing”, etc. Certain of these hadiths even violated the creed of *tawḥīd*. For example: “If one of you has believed firmly in a stone, it will surely benefit him.” And some are false superstitions, for example that the rose is created from the perspiration of the Prophet.

This situation prompted a number of the scholars of the Community to compile books of fabricated hadiths so as to warn against them, and especially since the books of moral guidance, softening of the hearts, *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), and others, are filled with them – even some books of hadith themselves. Among those scholars were: al-Ṣaghānī, Ibn Jawzī, al-Suyūṭī, al-Qārī, Ibn ‘Arāq, al-Shawkānī, and al-Laknawī, and al-Albānī in our time. So it is an obligation to make use of their books.

c) Interpretation of the ignorant

Wrong interpretation is that by which the reality of Islam is deformed, in which words are twisted from their proper contexts, and by which the main elements of Islam are diminished so that what issues from its fundamentals and directives is pushed out.

Just as the people of falsehood deviated so as to bring into Islam what is no part of it, these did so by deforming its priorities, putting back that whose right is to come forward, and bringing forward that whose right is to be put back.

Wrong interpretation and rotten understanding are a preoccupation of those who are ignorant of this religion, who never imbibed its spirit, and never pierced with insight to its realities. They do not have anything firmly-rooted in knowledge, nor impartiality towards the truth. They do not refrain from deviation and perversion in understanding. They refrain from the Qur'anic verses with explicit injunctions, the *muhkamāt*, and run after the *mutashābihāt*, the allegorical or figurative verses. They do so for the sake of dissension, of interpreting those verses in accordance with the caprice that leads astray from the path of God.

That is indeed the interpretation 'of the ignorant' – though they put on the garments of learned scholars, or present themselves with the titles of wise philosophers. It is obligatory to be alert to it, and warn against it, and to put in place the discipline necessary for protection from falling into it. The majority of the doomed sects and factions, split off from the Community, from its creed and its Law, and the groups deviated from the level way, were doomed by such error in interpretation.

At this point it is worthwhile to turn to Ibn al-Qayyim's enlightened discourse on the need for quality of insight about the Messenger of God. He mentioned this in the book *al-Rūb*. We cite from it what he said:

It is necessary that one understand from the Messenger his intent without exaggeration and without abridgement, for his speech does not carry that which it cannot sustain, nor falls short of his intent or his purpose in giving guidance or explanation. Neglect of that and abandonment of it has assuredly achieved straying in error from the right direction, which is not known except by God. Rather, wrong understanding about God and His Messenger is the root of every heretical innovation and error growing up within Islam. Indeed, it is the root of every failure in the roots and branches [of the religion], especially if conjoined with wrong purpose. Wrong understanding was in

certain matters abetted by the leaders despite their good purpose, and because of their evil purpose by those who follow [the leaders]. O the tribulation [that has visited] the religion and its people! And God is appealed to for help! The Qadaris, the Murji'is, the Khārijis, the Mu'tazilis, the Jahmis, and the Rāfiḍis, and all the rest of the factions of the heretics, appeared [and] caused discord only because of wrong understanding about God and His Messenger. [This situation persisted] until the religion became, in the hands of most of the people, that to which these misunderstandings led. But that [religion], as the Companions understood it, and those who followed them, from God and His Messenger, was then forsaken and those people did not turn to it nor pay attention to it [... ...] so far so that if you peruse the writing [of these people] from its beginning to its end, you do not find that its author has, in [even] a single place, understood from God and His Messenger his intent as it should be [understood]. And this only he knows who has known what [opinion] is held by the people, and laid it out beside what has come from the Messenger. As for one who has reversed the matter – thus, laid out what has come from the Messenger beside what he has believed with conviction and come to profess, and blindly followed therein the conjecture of whoever is more attractive to him – then it is not gaining a thing to speak with him. So reject him and what he has chosen for himself, and assign to him what he has assigned to himself. And give thanks to Him who has kept you untainted by this.

Bad interpretation of the texts – whether a text of the Qur'an or of the Sunnah – is a long-standing evil. Muslims have suffered from it, as the communities before them suffered. It steered them into deviation from the religion of God, distortion of His radiant words, and the derailment of the purposes He intended thereby, namely to lead humankind out of darkness into light.

The Muslims suffered from the interpretations of the differing sects, each of whom strove by tricks to direct the text so as to fit their sectarian doctrine, without concern for critical principles and the decisive basic rules of Law or language or reasoning. Among them were some who went beyond all bounds. For example, the Bāṭīnis, who displaced words from their meanings, and walked off with them on a road undisciplined by reason or tradition.

Hence the differing interpretations of the rationalist schools of philosophers and theologians, and most particularly the Mu‘tazilis. Hence too, among the jurists, those who forced the interpretation of the texts – notably the texts of the Sunnah – in support of their schools’ doctrines, which they captured with guile. They adopted their schools’ doctrines as sources and the texts as their branches. This was a dangerous invention. For it is obligatory that schools or doctrines refer back for authority and direction to the texts, not the other way around. The basic principle is that the non-infallible is referred back for authority and direction to the infallible: “And if you have a dispute on a thing refer it to God and His Messenger if you are believers in God and the Last Day” (*al-Nisā’*, 4: 59).

Interpretation is surely indispensable, but it has its place, its conditions, and its discipline. We have set this out in detail elsewhere.³¹

The cause of some of the bad interpretation was ignorance or absent-mindedness or the pursuit of conjecture – in other words, indolence of mind or deficiency in knowledge. Then there is another kind of bad interpretation whose cause is the pursuit of caprice. An example of that is what Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal narrated: that a hadith of ‘Ammār ibn Yāsir was mentioned to Mu‘āwiyah – “The group in rebellion will kill you”. Then he said to ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ: “Only the one who brought him killed him” meaning ‘Alī. This is an interpretation to be rejected from every aspect. Otherwise, we must say that the Messenger was himself the slayer of whoever was martyred with him in his expeditions, such as his uncle Ḥamzah and Muṣ‘ab ibn ‘Umayr and others.³² This interpretation is without doubt one whose motive is caprice.

The interpretations of the religious and theological sects are diverse. Their motive was only to support the school doctrine, even if by means of affectation and arbitrariness. In our time we have found the people inconsistent in embracing the authentic hadiths, even the verses of the noble Qur’an – so they may interpret them with meanings that are strange for them. This they do for the caprice in their souls. And caprice makes blind and deaf:

“And who is further astray than one who follows his caprice without the guidance from God?” (*al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28: 50).

III

PRINCIPLES FOR THE APPLICATION OF THE SUNNAH

It is necessary for one who applies the Sunnah of the Prophet to expel from it the deviations of the falsifiers, the distortions of the extremists, and the interpretations of the ignorant, and adhere to the few matters regarded as the fundamental principles in this field.

1: VERIFYING THE FIRMFNESS OF THE SUNNAH

The first such principle is that one verify the proof of the *sunnah* and its soundness according to the comparison, scientific method and painstaking detail, which the learned scholars applied to such proofs. This includes both *sanad* and *matn* (the academic apparatus and the text proper of the hadith), and equally whether it be the Sunnah of speech or deed or acceptance. The diligent researcher must have recourse to the people of renown and experience in this field of work. They were the assayers of the hadith, who exhausted their lives in study of it and teaching of it, in distinguishing the sound from the unsound, the accepted from the rejected. “And none can inform you like [One] Aware” (*al-Fāṭir*, 35: 14).

The scholars established for the hadith a science well-founded in its roots and well-ordered in its branches. It is the science of the principles of hadith (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*), or the idiom and terminology of hadith (*muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*). It holds for the hadith the place that *uṣūl al-fiqh* holds for *fiqh*. In point of fact it is an assemblage of disciplines. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ expanded it to 65 ‘kinds’. After him others added to that, until al-Suyūṭī (in *Tadrīb al-Rawī ‘alā Taqrīb al-Nawawī*) numbered as many as 93 ‘kinds’.

It is well-known that some questions in this science of *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* are agreed upon and on others there is difference of opinion.

The obligation on the learned is to be reserved on the disputed matters, and give preference therein according to the balance of evidence. Here, I report giving more weight to the approach of the forerunners among the scholars of the Community in the most resplendent of its epochs, over the approach of the later scholars. I do so because the former were more strict and bold in rejecting weakness in the hadiths, and more often firmly established than the latter.

They discussed a number of issues in the science. Among them are the following:

Ziyādat al-thiqah fī al-ḥadīth: additions in the hadith by a reliable narrator. Up to what point should one accept the additional material reported from such a narrator?

Taqwīyyatu al-ḥadīth bi-ta'addudi al-turuqi al-da'ifab: strengthening a hadith by the addition of weak routes of transmission. Which hadith is strengthened by such addition? Which category of the weak may one use for such addition?

Ḥadīth mawqūf: where the chain of narration goes back to a Companion and stops there, not going higher to the Prophet himself. Then, the question of its being understood as *marfū'* (as if from the Prophet himself) when its subject-matter has to do with that in which there is no room for opinion (*ra'y*).³³ But some of the scholars permitted latitude in that, in hadiths in which it is possible that there is room for opinion.³⁴

Maḍmūn: study of the topic of the hadith, or (in the terminology) its *matn* or content. Some of what the forerunners accepted in accordance with the characteristics of their epoch is not reckoned acceptable today in accordance with the development of knowledge in our epoch.

2: PROFICIENCY IN UNDERSTANDING THE SUNNAH

The second principle is that one be proficient in understanding the Prophetic text. Understanding it means understanding in harmony with the meanings indicated by the language; in the light of the path (the general intent) of the hadith, the particular circumstance

and aim of it; in the shade of the Qur’anic and Prophetic texts in turn; and in the framework of the general principles and the totality of the purposes of Islam. All that, together with the necessity of distinguishing what has come by way of the preaching of the Message, and what has not come in that way – according to the distinction of the learned doctor of Islam from India Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, known by the name Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dahlawī (d. 1176 AH). That distinction can be put in a different way (according to the expression of our teacher Maḥmūd Shaltūt, former Shaykh al-Azhar): what was part of the legislative Sunnah and what was not legislative; then, within the legislative Sunnah, what has attributes of general and permanent import, and what has attributes of particular and time-bound import. Confusion of the two kinds is among the worst defects (*al-āfāt*) in understanding the Sunnah.

Such defects did not come about as a result of the Sunnah not being firmly established – it was already firmly established and authenticated – but as a result of errors in understanding. Such error is an ancient disease – it touched the Sunnah just as it touched the Qur’an. It is what prompted the truth-seekers among our scholars to warn against error in understanding from God and from His Messenger.

3: THE TEXT BEING SAFE FROM CONTRADICTION BY WHAT IS STRONGER

The third principle is that one assure oneself of the safety of the text from contradiction by what is stronger than it. ‘What is stronger than it’ may be a text from the Qur’an, or other hadiths, more abundant in number of sources, or more sound in proof of their authenticity, or more consonant with original principles (*uṣūl*), or more fitted to the purpose of the Legislative measures. Or it may be the general purposes of the Law, which have acquired definitiveness because they are not derived from one or two texts, but from an assemblage of them, giving the advantage – through conjoining some with others, together with the authenticity of their proofs – of certainty and definitiveness.

This is connected to an important legal issue in both *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *uṣūl al-ḥadīth*, that is, *al-taʿārud wa al-tarjīb* (contradiction and preference on balance of evidence). The texts in outward form sometimes contradict each other but in their reality are not contradictory. It is incumbent on the jurist or scholar to remove the apparent contradiction, wherever possible, by reconciling the texts or, failing that, by judging on the balance of evidence. Al-Suyūfī stated in *Tadrīb al-Rāwī* that judgments on the balance of evidence are of more than one hundred kinds.

THE SOURCE OF BOTH LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE

The Sunnah is the second source of Islam for its Legislation and its guidance. Jurists refer to it to discover the Legal injunctions. In the same way preachers and educators do so, to draw from it inspiring meanings, worthy instructions and profound wisdom, and ways to persuade people to the good and dissuade them from the evil.

So that the Sunnah can carry out this important duty, one must give greater weight to its being proven to be from the Prophet. This is expressed in the idiom of the science of hadith as the hadith's being attested as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic, sound) or *ḥasan* (good). The *ṣaḥīḥ* is equivalent to the rank of 'excellent' or 'very good' (as such terms are understood for university degrees); the *ḥasan* to the rank of 'good' or 'acceptable'. Beyond that, the higher level of the *ḥasan* is considered as being close to the *ṣaḥīḥ*; in the same way its lower level is considered close to the *ḍaʿīf* (weak).

A *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith is one narrated by a narrator well-known for probity and for the completeness of his preserving from another narrator, from the beginning of the *sanad* to its end, when it connects to God's Messenger, without gap or rupture. Also, a *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith is safe from irregularities and defects.

Thus, one does not accept a hadith narrated by a narrator of unknown origin or whose circumstances are unknown, or whose probity, or the completeness of whose preserving, are doubted. Or if there is a gap or rupture in any link of his chain of narrators. Or

if the hadith reported from him is irregular (*shādhidh*) in that it contradicts a reliable narration from someone more trustworthy than himself. Or if there is in the hadith some hint of defect or something else objectionable in its *sanad* or its *matn* (the text being reported).

Let no one suppose about this knowledge, or about the people who conveyed it, that the Community's scholars used to accept anything from whoever might bring it to them, that one would come to them and say 'from So-and-So from So-and-So from God's Messenger', and they would answer: 'You have spoken the truth!' Rather, about everyone who came to them with a hadith, they were sure to ask a number of questions: Which circle of scholars and students is he from? Who are his teachers? Who are his fellow-students, who accompanied him in the study of the science? What are his character and his conduct in the view of his teachers, his companions and his pupils? Do people attest to his uprightness and his fear of God (*taqwā*)? To his thoroughness in preserving? Did he continue so throughout his life or did he change in the last years of his life? Who among his pupils studied under him in his old age, and who studied under him before he changed? And so on.

The learned scholars of the Community are in agreement that hadiths adduced in Legal injunctions affecting actions, which is a pillar of the science of fiqh and a foundation of the lawful and the unlawful, must be *ṣahīḥ* or *ḥasan*. However, they disagree in respect of the hadiths that are related to the merits of actions, invocations, what softens the hearts, *targhīb* (inspiring longing for God) or *tarhīb* (inspiring fear of God), and the like, which do not enter unequivocally under the heading of Legislation.

Among the learned scholars of the early generations (*salaf*) there were some who were relaxed about the reports of this class of hadiths, and did not see harm in publicizing them. But this being relaxed is not absolute, as some have supposed. Rather, it has its grounds and its conditions. However, many abused this relaxation of standards (for hadiths not connected with actions stipulated by

the Law), and thereby veered people off the level path, and polluted the wellspring of pure Islam.

The books of preaching and what softens the hearts, and the books of Sufism, abound in this kind of hadiths. However, we are of the opinion that most of them are not satisfied with weak or flimsy hadiths. Rather, these books follow sayings that have no source or *sanad*, some of them even contradict and belie God's Messenger. Hadith scholars warned against such hadiths, and composed books clearly setting out their spuriousness. They were unanimous on the prohibition of narrating such weak or false reports, except in order to expose their falsehood and nullity. As a result of their work, there was no circulation of them among the mass of people.

The same kind of flimsy and rejected sayings are found in many books of *tafsīr*, to the extent that they habitually presented the notorious fabricated saying on the merits of certain Qur'anic *surabs*. They did so even though senior hadith experts (*buffāz*) had exposed its defect and explained its invalidity, leaving no further excuse for anyone to report it or blacken the pages of his book with it. Yet the likes of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Tha'ālibī, al-Bayḍāwī, Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī, and others persisted in presenting the false hadith.

A DEFENCE OF FABRICATED HADITHS REFUTED

More common than such presentation of the false hadith is to find a Qur'an commentator – for example the author of *Rūḥ al-Bayān* – willing to justify quoting the hadith and to defend it. This author, at the end of the commentary on *Sūrat al-Tawbah*, with an enviable daring, goes so far as to say:

Know that, about the hadiths that the author of *al-Kashshāf* cited at the end of this surah (and al-Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī and al-Mawla Abū al-Sa'ūd followed him [in doing so], may God have mercy on them, the cream of Qur'anic commentators), the learned scholars often [had] discussion [and differences], with some [of the scholars] affirming [those hadiths], others rejecting them on the basis of their being fabricated, like Imam al-Ṣaghānī and others. [... ...]

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What is apparent to this poor slave of God, may God be indulgent with what is decreed for him, is that those hadiths are bound to be either sound and strong, or enfeebled and weak, or falsified and fabricated.

If they are sound and strong, then no discussion on them [is proper or necessary]. But if their *isnāds* are weak, then the hadith scholars have agreed that action is permitted on the weak hadith for *targhīb* and *tarhīb*, as in al-Nawawī's *al-Adbkār* and 'Alī ibn Burhān al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī's *Insān al-ʿUyūn* and Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rūmī's *al-Asrār al-Muḥammadiyyah*, and other [works].

If they are fabricated: then it has been mentioned by al-Ḥākim and others that a man from among the ascetics took it on himself to compose hadiths on the virtue of the Qur'an and its surahs, and then it was said to him: "Why do you do this?" He said: "I saw people renouncing the Qur'an, and I longed to inspire them to it." Then it was said to him that the Prophet said: "One who has with premeditation forged a lie against me, let him provide for his seat in the Fire." Then he said: "I did not lie *against* him; rather, I lied *for* him."

He meant: that lying *against* him leads to the destruction of the foundations of Islam and undermines the Law and the injunctions, and is not like the other – lying *for* him. [That, the lying for him,] is for encouragement to following his Law and following in his tracks in his path. Shaykh ʿIzz al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Salām said: "Speaking is a means to [attain] objectives. Then every praiseworthy objective may arrive at its objective by means of either of the two, [speaking] truth and [speaking] falsehood. Now [speaking] falsehood is prohibited. Then, if arriving at [the objective] is possible by [speaking] falsehood and not [possible] by [speaking] the truth, then telling a lie in that [instance] is permitted (*mubāh*) provided the attaining of that objective is permitted, and it is obligatory (*wājib*) provided the objective is obligatory. So this regulates it [i.e. this is the ruling principle in such situations]."³⁵

Here we cannot help but express our consternation by saying *lā ḥawla walā quwwata illa bi Allah* and *innā li Allah wa innā ilayhi rājiʿūn*: 'There is no might or power except with God' and 'To God we belong and to Him we are returning?'

One marvels at the sin of pride that publishes the like of this discourse from a man self-enrolled among commentators on the

Book of God. Some people have described him as *faqīh* (a jurist, one who understands the Law of Islam) and *uṣūlī* (an expert in the *uṣūl* or principles of fiqh)! But what understanding (*fiqh*) does this man have who is ignorant of what are, according to the exacting scholars, the primary things? This shaykh (he has a Sufi leaning) does not know that God perfected the religion for us, and thereby completed the blessing upon us. So we do not recognize any need for someone to complete it for us by manufacturing hadiths of his own, still less that he presume to correct God, or to strengthen his Messenger. In effect he says to the Prophet: 'I lie for you so as to make up for you the shortcomings of your religion, and I fill up any gaps in it with the hadiths I contrive.'

As for the statement of Ibn 'Abd al-Salām: it is being taken quite out of context. Among what it permits are certain sorts of speaking – such as deception in war, and making peace between two parties, and giving help to an innocent fleeing a tyrant, and other situations like that mentioned appropriately in the context.

In any case, the statement of Ibn 'Abd al-Salām itself rebuts the claim of this claimant. For Ibn 'Abd al-Salām has stated that for every praiseworthy objective that may be arrived at by both telling the truth and telling lies, telling lies is prohibited. So here, in the context of this discussion, he would say: if all of the desired, preferred objectives which the fabricated hadiths persuade to, and all of the repudiated objectives which they dissuade from, are without doubt capable of attainment by means of hadiths that are *ṣahīh* and *ḥasan*, then falsehood is therefore prohibited, indeed it is one of the greatest of the great sins.

REJECTION OF THE *ṢAḤĪḤ* IS EQUAL TO ACCEPTANCE OF THE FABRICATED

Just as accepting invalid and fabricated hadiths and attributing them to God's Messenger is an offence, an absurdity and danger, so too, equal to it in nullity, is rejecting the *ṣahīh* and established hadiths – out of caprice or pride or presuming to know better than God and His Messenger. Doing so entails an evil conjecture about

the Community, its scholars, and the leaders of its best generations and noblest summits. In time past, the mass of people tended to accept weak and fabricated hadiths. As for the general public in this time: they tend to reject the authenticated hadiths – with no knowledge, no guidance, and no enlightened book. We do not mean by ‘general public’ the illiterate and those like them – for those are not the ones thrusting themselves into what they are not good at. We mean by ‘general public’ only the self-exalted and deluded ones – who ‘never leave a house by the door’ (that is, who love indirection and complication), who never strengthen knowledge by referring to its sources, who know the outer husk of knowledge, grabbing it by snatches from secondary references, or from orientalists and missionaries and their like. The important thing here is that rejection of a *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith is, in the religion, like the acceptance of a rejected hadith: they are on a par.

Acceptance of falsified hadiths enters into the religion what is not of it; rejection of authenticated hadiths drives out of the religion what is of it. Without doubt, both are reproached and censured alike – acceptance of the false and rejection of the true.

THE DOUBTS OF THE OLD ENEMIES OF THE SUNNAH

Since ancient times heretics and innovators have raised doubts and allegations in refutation of the Sunnah. The learned scholars and truth-seekers turned upon them to ruin and frustrate them. One such scholar was al-Shāṭibī:

Imam al-Shāṭibī said:

Within the insurgency of heretical innovators [certain] factions have at times justified rejection of hadiths with [the argument] that they avail themselves of conjecture, and conjecture is censured in the Qur’an – as in His saying, Exalted is He: “They follow but a conjecture and what their selves fancy” (*al-Najm*, 53: 23); and He said: “They follow only conjecture and conjecture does not avail a thing against the truth” (53: 28); and what has come with that meaning [in other verses]. [They exaggerate in this line of argument] to the point that they make

permitted what God has made forbidden by the tongue of His Prophet, though it is not made forbidden in the Qur'an textually. They surely purposed thereby to affirm themselves in, from what was appealing to them, some notions of their own minds.

The conjecture meant in the verse, as also in the hadith, is other than what they have alleged. We have found that it has three means [ways in which it is used and can be looked at]:

Firstly. Conjecture about the *uṣūl* [root principles or fundamentals] of the religion. According to the scholars it is of no use because of the likely possibility of [the truth's] being opposed to [what] the one conjecturing has conjectured. [A conjecture is by definition either true or false; the mere possibility of its being false makes it useless for establishing the fundamentals of the Law]. Conjecture in respect of the *furū'* [the branches or derived matters in the Law] is different. For, according to specialists in the Law, it is acted upon because of the evidence that demonstrates it. So conjecture is censured except for what is connected to the *furū'*, and this is correct – the learned scholars have mentioned it in this context [i.e. they have allowed a conditional role for conjecture in connection with the details of the Law, not its fundamentals].

Secondly. Conjecture prefers, out of two contradictory [possibilities], one over the other, with no demonstration for the [one] preferred. [There is] no doubt that it is censured because it is an arbitrary judgment. For that reason, “conjecture” is followed in the verse by “the self's fancy” in His saying: “They follow but a conjecture and what their selves fancy.” So they incline to a matter on bare prejudice and fancy. A conjecture whose steps are demonstrated is different. Then it is not censured in the generality [of cases] because it moves out of [bare] following fancy. For that [reason], it is affirmed and acted upon, according to its requirement, whenever it is fitting to be acted upon, for example as in the *furū'*.

Thirdly. Conjecture is of two varieties: [1] conjecture dependent upon definitive principle. These are the conjectures [that are] acted upon in the Law wherever they occur, since [such conjecture] is dependent upon a well-known principle, and it is of a species whose kind is well-known. And [2] conjecture not dependent upon a definitive [principle]; rather, it is based on something other than principle, and it is censured – as has been set out [above]. If [it is] dependent on a[nother] conjecture like itself, and if that conjecture is based also on a

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definitive [principle], then as before. [On the other hand, if it is based] upon something other [than definitive principle], then it is censured.

So, by the implication of all [the foregoing]: for a solitary report with an authenticated *sanad* – which must be dependent upon a principle definitive in the Law – acceptance of it is obligatory, and so we accept it absolutely. In the same way, as the conjectures of the unbelievers are without basis on anything, then one must reject them, and their meriting being considered is non-existent. (This last response is borrowed from an original whose full exposition is in *Kitāb al-Muwāfaqāt*, and to God belongs the praise.)

Some of those who have strayed surely go too far in rejection of the hadiths. They rejected the opinion of [one who] relied upon what is in [the hadiths] to the extent of unjustly attacking [his] opinion as [being] opposed to reason, and accounted the one who said [it] as insane.

Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī has narrated about some whom he met in the East who are deniers of the *ru'yab* [the believers' seeing of God in the Garden]: that it was said to [a denier of the *ru'yab*]: “Is unbelief attributed to one who affirms the [possibility of] *ru'yab* of the Creator, or not?” Then [this denier] said: “No! For he has said what is unacceptable to reason, and whoever has said what is unacceptable to reason has not unbelieved.” Ibn al-ʿArabī said: “Then this is our status according to them [i.e. they think us mad]!” So let the fortunate reflect on what the pursuit of fancy leads to. May God protect us from that by His favor.³⁶

Ibn Qutaybah has mentioned in his book *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth* many of the specious doubts, severally and individually, which the enemies of the Sunnah stirred up. He invalidated them, specious doubt by specious doubt, nor did he take leave of them until he transformed their fire to ashes.

THE DOUBTS OF NEW ENEMIES OF THE SUNNAH

In our times new enemies of the Sunnah have arisen. Some are from outside our lands, like the missionaries and the orientalist. Others are from within our lands, from among those tutored by missionaries and orientalist, or influenced by them, directly or

indirectly. These people have made use of the weaponry of older adversaries of the Sunnah and joined to it new weaponry inspired by the culture of the present. They called on these and those with their ‘cavalry’ and their ‘infantry’ against the Sunnah and its books, its narrators and its methods. They have been helped in that by places and institutions with power and shrewd policies. However, God has sent for the Sunnah, from among great contemporary scholars, those who, with overwhelming truths and telling arguments on their side, have made a stand against the doubts of the skeptics, and their vanities and frauds. “So the truth was brought to pass and what they were doing made obsolete, and there they were vanquished and overturned [to become] the ridiculed” (*al-A‘rāf*, 7: 118–19).³⁷

BEING CONTENT WITH THE GUIDANCE OF THE QUR’AN

Among the doubts of the enemies of the Sunnah, which they repeat continually, is their claim that the Qur’an suffices without the Sunnah – in consideration of the fact that there is detailed exposition in it of everything, as God said: “We revealed to you the Book as a clarification of everything and as a guidance and as a mercy and good tidings for those who have surrendered” (*al-Nahl*, 16: 89). And He said: “Assuredly in their story there is a lesson for people of understanding. It is not a made-up story; rather, it is a confirmation of that which is before you and a detailed exposition of everything, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe” (*Yūṣuf*, 12: 111). They make the same claim also because (they say) God vouchsafed the preservation for us of the Qur’an, but not that of the Sunnah.

The answer to that claim is that the Sunnah is without a doubt the clarification of the Qur’an. It is that which details what is summary in the Qur’an, particularizes what is general in it, and qualifies what is absolute in it. If the Sunnah were not there, we would not know the details of the rites (prayer, fasting, alms-tax, pilgrimage) and other necessary and essential duties. For this reason, God said: “And We are revealing to you the Remembrance

so that you make clear to the people what We have revealed to them, and perhaps they may reflect” (*al-Nahl*, 16: 44). Moreover, it is the Qur’an itself that has enjoined on us obedience to the Messenger, just as it has enjoined on us obedience to God: “Say: ‘Obey God and obey the Messenger’” (*al-Nūr*, 24: 54); “O believers: Obey God and obey the Messenger, and the people of authority among you; and if you have a dispute on any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger” (*al-Nisā’*, 4: 59). The scholars were unanimous on the point that referring to God means referring to His Book, and referring to the Messenger means referring to his Sunnah. God said: “Let those be warned who deviate from his [the Messenger’s] commands lest a trial afflict them or a painful punishment afflict them” (*al-Nūr*, 24: 63).

As for the claim that God has preserved only the Qur’an – namely, that He guarantees its preservation, and does not guarantee the preservation of the Sunnah. This has already been explained by al-Shāṭibī in *al-Muwāfaqāt*: that the preservation of the Qur’an vouchsafes that of the Sunnah because the latter is the exposition of the former. For the preservation of what is clarified necessarily entails the preservation of what is clarifying it.

REJECTION OF HADITHS BECAUSE OF MISCOMPREHENSION

What I wish to draw attention to here is rejection of the Sunnah and *ṣaḥīḥ* hadiths as a result of miscomprehension arising in the mind of one not specialized and not well-grounded in this science. That has confirmed for us that the need of the approaching time is investigation and closely-detailed study of how the Sunnah should be understood, with intelligent recourse to its sources and its authorities. It is what we will be calling attention to in subsequent pages.

Rejection of the ṣaḥīḥ on account of poor understanding

Among the harms to which the Sunnah is exposed is that some rash individual reads a hadith, presumes for it a meaning of his own and interprets it accordingly. That meaning being unaccep-

table to him, he then rushes to reject the hadith, along with the discarded meaning. But if he had been fair, looked attentively and investigated, he would know that the meaning of the hadith is not as he understood it. He would know that he had prescribed for it, as suited his own judgment and taste, a meaning which neither Qur'an nor Sunnah present, which the language of the Arabs does not compel, and which no esteemed learned scholar from before him advocated.

The hadith of ʿĀ'ishah: "He would command me to put on izār, then would be intimate with me, while I was having my monthly period"

An example is the hadith, narrated by al-Bukhārī and others, from ʿĀ'ishah, that she said: "God's Messenger would command me, while I was having my monthly period, to put on the *izār* (lower garment), then he would be intimate with me."

Someone writing in the Kuwaiti journal *al-ʿArabī* nearly a third of a century ago rejected this hadith. He based his argument on the claim that it was at variance with the Qur'anic verse: "They ask you about menstruation. Say: it is a hurt; so keep apart from the women in menstruation, and do not go near them until they are cleansed (of it)" (*al-Baqarah*, 2: 222). The writer said the Qur'an commands the keeping apart from women in a state of menstruation, whereas the hadith says that the Messenger was intimate with his wife above the *izār*.

We have already rebutted this argument in detail elsewhere.³⁸ The gist is that there is no contradiction between the hadith and the Qur'an, as the writer had understood there to be. Rather, the hadith provides commentary on the Qur'an; it clarifies the meaning of the *iʿtizāl* (the keeping apart) that is commanded. The intent is not complete avoidance (*ijtināb*) of women – as the Jews do, who will not spend the night with the wife when she is in this state. The purpose in respect of the *iʿtizāl* that is commanded is that one forsakes the bodily intimacy of sexual intercourse. As for mutual pleasure in what is other than that – it is not part of that which is prohibited.³⁹

Hadith: "O God, have me live as a miskīn ..."

Another example is the hadith that Ibn Mājah reported from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī and al-Ṭabarānī from ʿUbadah ibn Ṣāmit: "O God, have me live *miskīnan* (as a poor person) and have me die *miskīnan* and gather me [hereafter] in the company of the *miskīn*."⁴⁰ Someone read this hadith and he understood *al-maskanah* (poverty) to mean want of material wealth, with consequent neediness before other human beings. Now, this understanding of the meaning repudiates the supplication of the Prophet against the affliction of poverty,⁴¹ and his asking from God, virtue and prosperity,⁴² and his saying to Saʿd: "Indeed, God loves the slave [who is] prosperous, God-fearing and not ostentatious,"⁴³ and his saying to ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ: "Excellent indeed is the righteous wealth of a righteous man!"⁴⁴

Because of the apparent contradiction, this person rejected the hadith mentioned. But the reality is that *al-maskanah* here does not mean 'poverty' in that sense. How could it mean that when he supplicated God against it, and associated it with unbelief – "O God, I seek refuge with You from unbelief and poverty"?⁴⁵ And his Lord entrusted him with prosperity: "And He found you destitute and enriched you" (*al-Dubā*, 93: 8). What is meant by *al-maskanah* is as Ibn al-Athīr said: "He meant by it lowliness and humility before God, and lest one should become one of the oppressors and the arrogant."

That is how the Prophet lived – far from the life of the arrogant ones, whether in look or form: he dressed as the slaves and the poor dressed; and he ate what they ate; and when a stranger came he (the stranger) did not distinguish him from his Companions for he was with them as one of them; and at home he mended his shoe with his own hand; and he patched his cloak; and he milked his sheep; and he turned a millstone to grind grains alongside the woman neighbor and the slave.

When a man entered to him and, being in awe of him, was trembling, he said: "Be at ease, for I am not a king. Rather, I am

the son of a woman of the Quraysh who used to eat dried meat in Makkah.”

The hadith on the renewal of the religion every century

Another example is the hadith, which Abū Dā’ūd and al-Ḥākim reported, and more than one scholar authenticated, from Abū Hurayrah from the Prophet: “God will send to this Community at the head of every century one who will renew for it its religion.”⁴⁶ Someone read this and understood renewal (*tajdīd*) as meaning that the renewer develops the religion and alters it so as to adapt it to the age. He argued: ‘But the religion is not subject to renewal, it is firmly established and does not change. It is not the duty of the religion to adapt to progress; rather, it is the duty of progress to adapt to the religion.’

Now, if ‘renewal’ meant that, in every age, we bring out (so to speak) a ‘new edition’ of the religion, its principles and teachings, going along with the needs of the people and in convoy with developments – and this overturns the truths of the religion – then a hadith that urges this should indeed be discarded. The person would be right if the intent of *al-tajdīd* had been what he interpreted it to be. But it is not.

The renewing meant – as I have explained elsewhere⁴⁷ – is of the understanding of the religion, and of faith and action. For the renewal of a thing is that by which an effort is made to return it to what it was like on the day of its origination, and then it emerges so as to seem new despite its antiquity. This is achieved by the strengthening of what has weakened, and the repairing of what has deteriorated over time, and the patching of what has frayed, so that it reverts closer to its original form. So the meaning of renewal is not the alteration of its ancient nature, or the replacement of it by another thing, novel and newly created. For that has nothing to do with renewal.

Let us take an example from among tangible things. If we intended renewal of an ancient historical structure, that would mean: letting its substance, its character and functions, and every-

thing that survives of its distinguishing features, remain; repairing everything that decay has done to it; improving its entrances, facilitating the approaches to it; improving the specification of it; etc. It is nothing to do with renewal that we should demolish it, and erect a prestigious building in the latest style in its place.

It is the same with the religion: its renewal does not mean the issuing of a ‘new edition’ of it. Rather, it means the reversion of it to where it was in the epoch of the Messenger and his Companions, and of those who followed them with sincerity. It means: the revival of *ijtihād* in it, and recourse to its original wellsprings, liberation from inflexibility and imitativeness (*taqlīd*), and examination of the legacy with a critical eye so as to benefit from its positive qualities and guard against any points of deficiency in it. Close to this renewal of thinking is another renewal, and that is the renewal of faith in the religion, devotion to its precious values and its principles, and renewing the invitation to it in harmony with the circumstances and necessities of the age – as has come in the hadith: “The faith wears out inside you, as the robe becomes worn out [outside you] – so beg God that He renew the faith in your hearts.”⁴⁸

“Islam is founded on five [foundations]”

Among the strangest instances in our time of the rejection of *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith, on account of incompetent understanding, is that some people have rejected the most famous hadith – one that Muslims young and old have memorized, the generality and the elite – and it is the hadith of Ibn ‘Umar and others: “Islam is founded upon five [foundations]: testifying that there is no god except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; and the establishing of the prayer; and the paying of *zakah*; and fasting Ramadan; and pilgrimage to the House for whoever is able to [make] a way thereto.”

The pretext for this bold foolhardiness in rejecting the hadith is that the hadith does not mention *jihad*, despite its great importance in Islam. And that is the basis for rejecting it!

This view is ignorant of the obvious fact that jihad is obligatory on some, not on others; that it is not an individual duty except in special circumstances for most particular considerations. That is very different from the five foundations, which are imposed on the generality of all people.

If the reasoning of the one who rejects the hadith were correct, it would entail rejecting the verses of the Qur'an which describe the good qualities of the believers: the God-fearing, the bondsmen of the Merciful, the virtuous and upright, the good-doers, those who possess spiritual intellect; and other qualities, which God has extolled in His Book, and promised for them most abundant recompense, but among those good qualities He does not mention jihad.

Read on that: the qualities of the God-fearing, in the first verses of *al-Baqarah*, 2: 2–5, of the people of virtue and veracity in the verse “it is not virtue ...” (2: 177); the qualities of the believers at the beginning of *al-Anfal*, 8: 2–4; the qualities of those who possess spiritual intellect in *al-Ra'ad*, 13: 20–22; the qualities of the believers and the inheritors of *Firdaws* (Paradise) at the beginning of *al-Mu'minun*, 23: 1–10; the qualities of the bondsmen of the Merciful at the end of *al-Furqan*, 25: 63–77; the qualities of the God-fearing and the good-doers in *al-Dhāriyat*, 51: 15–23; the qualities of the most-honored in the Gardens of God in *al-Ma'arij*, 70: 22–35. In all of these occurrences and others in the Book of God, jihad is not mentioned. Then will that enormous ignorance which rejects the hadith also expel these verses from the Book of God?

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah has gone to some length in explaining the confinement of Islam to the five foundations mentioned, and why other fundamental obligations are not mentioned, such as jihad, or the virtue of looking after one's parents, the bond of near kinship, and matters similar to that. He said:

In what was asked about is that: if there is, among the outward actions that God made obligatory on him, more than these five, then why did he say: Islam is these five? Some people have answered that these [five] are the more visible and the more powerful symbols of Islam, and by the slave's accom-

plishing of them his *islām* is completed; and by his leaving them is indicated the dissolution of the bond of his being bound [in Islam].

The more precise explanation is: that the Prophet mentioned the religion that renders up the slave to his Lord absolutely, namely the right of God, upon individuals, of exclusive worship. So He made it a duty for each one who was capable of it that he worship God by it, dedicating the religion purely to Him; and this [religion] – it is [made up of] the five. [As to] what is similar to that [in being obligatory], then it is what is obligatory according to occasions and exigencies, and so the duties thereof [being connected to occasions and exigencies] do not extend universally to all people.

Rather: [these other obligations comprise] either [1] the collective obligations – such as jihad, and commanding the good and forbidding the evil, and what [necessarily] follows [from] that by way of authority, and governance and the issuing of Legal dicta, and [scholarly or philosophical] inquiry, and transmission of hadith, and other [such duties] –

Or [2, those obligations which are] obligatory by occasion of the right of individual persons. By [that right] is specified the one on whom it is obligatory to fulfil it [i.e. the right of one individual specifies another individual for whom that right becomes a duty], and it is voided by annulment, and when the matter is achieved, or by acquittal – whether by his releasing or by the accomplishment of the matter.

Then the rights of the slaves [of God] – for example: settlement of debts; and restitution of the usurped [thing], and of loans, and of deposits for safe-keeping; and just restitution of wrongs respecting blood relations and properties and lands – indeed these are rights of individual persons, and when they release from them, [these rights] are voided, being binding on one person, not on another, in one circumstance, not in another. They are not incumbent upon every competent slave as is unmixed worship of God. That is why the Muslims share in them with the Jews and the Christians. The five [however, are obligations of a kind quite] different, for indeed these are among the distinguishing [things] of the Muslims [i.e. unique and restricted to the Muslims].

In the same way, what is obligatory respecting the bonds of close kinship, and the rights of wives and children and neighbors and [business] partners and the poor; and what is obligatory respecting the rendering of testimony, and the

issuing of Legal dicta, and the giving judgment, and governance, and commanding the good and forbidding the evil, and jihad: all of that is obligatory by the contingent occasions, and upon some and not others. [This kind of obligation exists] in order to attract benefits or repel harms; if [the aims are] achieved without action by a person, [then] they are not obligatory. For that which is shared between people, then it is obligatory collectively; and what is particular then it is obligatory upon [a particular individual] Zayd, not upon [another individual] ‘Amr. The people do not share in obligations [laid] upon each competent individual to discharge in person, except for the five. For indeed the wife of Zayd and his near kin are not the wife of ‘Amr and his near kin, so it is not obligatory upon this one the like of [what is] obligatory upon this other. Different is fasting Ramadan; and pilgrimage to the House; and the five services of prayer; and the zakah. Indeed the zakah, though it is a right on property, yet it is due to God, and the eight categories [of recipients] are its [only lawful] heads of expenditure. This is why intention is obligatory therein, and [why] it is not permissible that another person do it [i.e. discharge the duty of zakah] without one’s permission, and why it is not demanded from the unbelievers.⁴⁹

On reckless haste in rejecting the ṣaḥīḥ and its being dubious to do so

In our view, haste in rejection of any hadith, though it is ṣaḥīḥ and affirmed, makes its having been understood doubtful. Those deep-rooted in knowledge do not venture recklessness in rejecting ṣaḥīḥ hadiths. Rather, they approve the opinion held by the early generations of the Community (*salaf*). For when it is established that they accepted a hadith, and no esteemed leader censured it, then necessarily they did not recognize any criticism of it on grounds of irregularity nor any cause of objection to it.

A fair-minded scholar must let the hadith stand, and study the intelligible meaning or the appropriate interpretation of it. This is the point of division in this field between the Mu‘tazilis (rationalists) and Ahl al-Sunnah (the Sunnis, those who followed the Sunnah). The former were prompt to dismiss every difficulty of hadith that resisted what they had accepted as principles of knowledge

and religion. But Ahl al-Sunnah applied their minds to interpretation of the difficult hadith, and to bringing together what, outwardly, was at variance, and reconciling what was contradictory.

For that purpose Abū Muhammad Ibn Qutaybah (d. 267 AH) composed his well-known book *Ta'wīl Mukhtalaf al-Ḥadīth*, refuting the stormy assaults stirred up by the Mu'tazilis around some hadiths, which they reproached for being contradictory to the Qur'an or to reason, or false in light of sense-perception, or for being opposed to other hadiths. After Ibn Qutaybah, the Ḥanafī hadith scholar Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321) composed his book *Mushkil al-Āthār* in four bound volumes,⁵⁰ endeavoring to locate the points of difficulty in these hadiths, interpreting them and making them acceptable, and distinguishing them as conformable to reason.

Once the evidence of a hadith's being from the Prophet has been affirmed, a far-reaching, thorough examination into how it may be understood is obligatory; and there must be every caution against dismissing it merely to please far-fetched arguments, which may themselves have a mistake hidden in them.

The stance of 'Ā'ishah on certain hadiths

The clearest example of that is some of what has come from 'Ā'ishah. She censured some hadiths on the basis of her conjecture that they were opposed to the Qur'an, or to the established principles of Islam, or for other reasons. At times, it is the case that she censured hadiths narrated by the Companions, even though there is no doubting their veracity or their exactitude in preserving, and despite the hadiths' general import being sound. Take for example the hadith of the cat, and what has come about the punishment for tormenting it until it died. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal narrated it from 'Alqamah, he said:

We were with 'Ā'ishah. Then Abū Hurayrah entered, so she said: "Are you the one who narrated the hadith – that a woman tormented a cat, confining her and then not feeding her, not giving her water – ?" Then he said: "I heard it from him" meaning the Prophet. Then she said: "Do you know

what the woman was? At the time she did [that] she was an unbeliever. Indeed the believer is more noble with God, the All-Powerful and Sublime, than that He would punish him for a cat! So when you narrate a hadith from the Messenger of God, then watch how you are doing so!”⁵¹

Ā’ishah censured Abū Hurayrah for his reporting of this hadith with his fashioning of it, and she reckoned that he did not preserve its wording as he heard it from the Prophet. Her argument is that she judged it too much that a believing human being be punished because of a cat; that a believer is nobler with God than that He would enter him into the Fire because of a dumb animal! May God forgive Ā’ishah, for she was forgetful of a thing here in this matter that is the most important of the most important things. It is this: what demonstrates against the woman is the deed – namely that the cat was imprisoned until it died starving. It is proof plain of the hardness of heart of that woman and her cruelty to God’s weak creatures, and that the rays of compassion did not reach into her bosom. None enters the Garden except the compassionate, and God does not show mercy except to those who show mercy. If she had shown mercy to one that is on the earth, then the One Who is in the heavens would have shown mercy to her.

This hadith and others of the same import should be counted in the sphere of humane values with pride in Islam, which respects every living creature, for Islam establishes a reward for human kindness to every group of creatures with a moist liver. What completes this meaning is what has come in another hadith, which al-Bukhārī also reported: that a man gave water to a dog, God acknowledged it from him and forgave him; and that a prostitute gave water to a dog, and God forgave her.

On top of that is the fact that Abū Hurayrah is not alone in the reporting of this hadith, so that it might be supposed he did not retain its words correctly – how could that be, when he is without exception the strongest in memory of the Companions? Furthermore, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, al-Bukhārī and Muslim have reported from Ibn ‘Umar that he said: “A woman is punished for a cat. She confined her so that she died starving. Then she entered the Fire

on account of [the cat]. God said: You did not feed her, and did not give her water, when you had tied her up. Nor did you let her go forth that she might eat of the vermin of the earth.”⁵² Also, Aḥmad has narrated from Jābir that he said: “A woman tormented a cat and tied him up until he died, and she did not let him go forth so he might eat of the vermin of the earth.”⁵³

So Abū Hurayrah is not alone in the reporting of this hadith. But even if he had been alone it would not have impaired at all the quality or meaning of his report.