

GOD'S PRESERVATION OF THE SUNNAH (PART 7 OF 7): SUMMARY

Rating: 4.0

Description: The safeguarding and time sequence relating to preservation of the Sunnah and it's comparison with the preservation of other religious scriptures, noticeably the Torah and the Gospels.

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The above has been a very brief description of some of the important means by which Allah has preserved the ever-important Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. One of the important aspects to note is that these safeguards started going into effect virtually during the time of the Prophet himself. There was no time lag, leaving the door open to a massive loss of information or to distortion.

In the following statement, M. Z. Siddiqi has done an excellent job of summing up the protection of the sunnah in the early years:

The Hadeeth in the sense of the reports of the sayings and doings of Muhammad has been a subject of keen pursuit and constant study by the Muslims throughout the Muslim world since the very beginning of the history of Islam up to the present times. During the life-time of Muhammad many of the companions tried to learn by heart whatever he said, and observed keenly whatever he did; and they reported these things to one another. Some of them wrote down what he said in *Saheefahs* (scrolls) which were later on read by them to their students, and which were preserved in their families and also by the Followers. After the death of Muhammad, when his companions spread in various countries, some of them as well as their followers undertook long arduous journeys, courted poverty and penury in order to collect them together... Their remarkable activity with regard to the preservation and propagation of hadeeth is unique in the literary history of the world... [And the excellence of their sciences remains] unparalleled in the literary history of the world even to-day.[1]

It was these processes that ultimately culminated in the fine-tuned sciences of hadeeth and the detail grading of the reports traced back to the Prophet. In general, the scholars would not accept a report as an authentic hadeeth unless that report can be verified with a complete chain made up of only sound and trustworthy narrators all the way back to the Prophet. Anything short of that would be rejected as a weak hadeeth.

The more one goes on to study the sciences of hadeeth, the more he/she will feel comfortable with the feeling that the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad has been minutely preserved, just as Allah had promised in the Quran. When the scholars of hadeeth—who are the specialists in that field and who have spent their lifetime in mastering that discipline—agree upon the authenticity of a hadeeth, there should be no need for debate or question. The only thing left to do is to believe in it and do one's best to apply the meaning of that hadeeth in one's life.

Comparison with Other Scriptures

When referring to the hadeeth of the Prophet, it is commonplace for some Westerners to use the word "tradition." This immediately brings forth the impression of a very haphazard and unscholarly report. The reality, as alluded to above, is completely different. The use, therefore, of this word "tradition" may be nothing more than a smokescreen to give the impression that the hadeeth were not preserved. Another common description that appears is a reference to the preservation of the hadeeth as being similar to that of the Gospels.

This is also a rather clever phrase that definitely has negative connotations to it for many. In fact, many converts have studied the Gospels and know how unreliable they are—this being one of the reasons why they began to search for a religion other than Christianity. Therefore, such a statement will quickly shake their faith in hadeeth.

The stark reality is that no honest comparison can be made between the minute and scientific preservation of the hadeeth of the Prophet and the preservation of the earlier scriptures. A few brief descriptions of the preservation—or lack thereof—of the earlier scriptures should suffice to contrast them with the preservation of the hadeeth.

After a lengthy discussion of the history of the Torah, Dirks concludes:

The received Torah is not a single, unitary document. It is a cut-and-paste compilation... with additional layering... While Moses, the person who received the original revelation, which the Torah is supposed to represent, lived no later than the 13th century BCE, and probably lived in the 15th century BCE, the received Torah dates to a much later epoch. The oldest identifiable substrata of the received Torah, i.e., J, can be dated no earlier than the 10th century BCE... Further, these different substrata were not combined into a received Torah until approximately 400 BCE, which would be approximately 1,000 years after the life of Moses. Still further, the received Torah was never totally standardized, with at least four different texts existing in the first century CE, which was approximately 1,500 years after the life of Moses. Additionally, if one adopts the Masoretic text as the most "official" text of the received Torah, then the oldest existing manuscript dates to circa 895 CE, which is about 2,300 years after the life of Moses. In short, although the received Torah may well contain some portions of the original Torah, the provenance of the received Torah is broken, largely unknown, and can in no way be traced to Moses.[\[2\]](#)

Although Jesus came many centuries after Moses, the revelation that he received did not fare much better. A group of Christians scholars known as the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar tried to determine which of the sayings attributed to Jesus can actually be considered authentic. They stated, “Eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him.”^[3] In describing the history of the gospels, they wrote, “The stark truth is that the history of the Greek gospels, from their creation in the first century until the discovery of the first copies of them at the beginning of the third, remains largely unknown and therefore unmapped territory.”^[4] Bart Ehrman’s work *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* has identified how the scripture has been changed over time. He states his thesis, which he proves in detail, at the outset, “My thesis can be stated simply: scribes occasionally altered the words of their sacred texts to make them more patently orthodox and to prevent their misuse by Christians who espoused aberrant views.”^[5] That is something like putting the cart before the horse: The beliefs should be based on the transmitted texts; not that the texts should be altered to fit the beliefs.

A Final Note about the Quran

The nature of the Quran is very different from that of the statements and actions of the Prophet. Obviously, the statements and actions are very large in number while the Quran is very limited in size. The Quran, which is not a large book at all, was preserved in memory as well as written form from the time of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Many of the Companions of the Prophet had memorized the entire Quran and, fearing what had happened to earlier religious communities, they took the necessary steps to protect it from any form of adulteration. Soon after the death of the Prophet, the Quran was all compiled together and shortly afterwards official copies were sent to the distant lands to ensure that the text was pure. To this day, one can travel to any part of the world and pick up a copy Quran and find that it is the same throughout the world. The task of preserving the Quran cannot actually compare to the task of preserving the bulk of the Sunnah. Hence, it is no surprise, given the attitude of the Muslims of that time, that the Quran was minutely preserved.

Footnotes:

[1] M. Z. Siddiqi, pp. 4-5.

[2]

Jerald F. Dirks, *The Cross & the Crescent* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2001), p. 53. Other important discussions of the authenticity of the Old Testament may also be found in Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Quran and Science* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1978), pp. 1-43; M. M. Al-Azami, pp. 211-263.

[3]

Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really Say?* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1993), p. 5.

[4]

Funk, et al., p. 9.

[5]

Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xi.

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