



An Introduction

to the Foundations of

Ahl al-Sunnah

Their Groups, Their Imams, Their Beliefs, Their Books

Written by Muhammad ibn Shams al-Din

Translated by Taim Otah Bashi

An Introduction to the Foundations of Ahl al-Sunnah

Their Groups, Their Imams, Their Beliefs, Their Books

WRITTEN BY

Muhammad ibn Shams al-Din

TRANSLATED BY

Taim Otah Bashi

Introduction

In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgement. You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, not those who earned anger and not those who went astray.

To proceed:

This is a short book introducing *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah*. I offer it to the Sunni who wants to review these foundations, and to anyone from the Shi'ah, Ibadis, or other religions and groups who wants to understand them.

The reader will learn: What does *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah* mean? Why is there disagreement over the term? What groups are connected to it? What are their religious sources? Who are their scholars? What are their books? And how does a person become one of them?

What Does *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah* Mean?

The word *Sunnah* is used in several ways: first, the way of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him; second, the prophetic hadiths; and third, something recommended in the religion.

The expression *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah* is also used in two ways. The first is a broad use: anyone who is not Shi'i. The second is a specific use: those who follow the way of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him.

The General Use: Anyone Who Is Not Shi'i

The name *Ahl al-Sunnah* arose from the saying of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him:

"Whoever among you lives after me will see much disagreement. So hold firmly to my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly guided caliphs. Hold fast to it, biting onto it with your molars. Keep away from newly invented matters, for every newly invented matter is an innovation, and every innovation is misguidance."^[R1]

When people later divided over the four rightly guided caliphs - Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali - people became clearly divided between those who held to them as the Messenger of Allah had instructed, and those who turned away from them. Those who held to the Prophet's instruction, "Hold firmly to my Sunnah," were called *Ahl al-Sunnah*. Those who turned away from that were called *Ahl al-Bid'ah*, the people of innovation.

As for *al-Jama'ah*, it refers to their call to unite upon what the Messenger of Allah commanded people to unite upon, in contrast to groups that stirred up trials, created divisions, and broke Muslim unity.

The Specific Use: Those Who Follow the Prophet's Way

"The Sunnah is what the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and his Companions were upon in belief, moderation, speech, and action."^[R2]

The Difference Between the Two Meanings

The specific meaning is the meaning that distinguishes the people of truth. Under the broad meaning, however, anyone who is not Shi'i may be called Sunni. That broad use can include Jahmis, Mu'tazilah, Murji'ah, Ash'aris, Maturidis, Nawasib, Ibadis, and Khawarij, even though some of them attack Ali, may Allah be pleased with him.

"In common usage it became widespread that the people of innovation were the Rafidah. Among ordinary people, the opposite of a Sunni came to mean only a Rafidi, because they showed more open opposition to the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah and the laws of his religion than the other people of desires."^[R3]

References

[R1] Reported by Ahmad, Ibn Majah, Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Hibban, and al-Hakim.

[R2] Majmu' al-Fatawa, 5/111.

[R3] Majmu' al-Fatawa, 28/482.

But the truth is that "the Sunnah is the truth, not falsehood."^[R4]

So the Sunnah is "following the transmitted reports,^[E1] the hadith, remaining safe^[E2] and submitting."^{[E3][R5]}

Names Used for Them

Ahl al-Sunnah: because they follow the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him.

Ahl al-Hadith: because they follow the prophetic hadith, in contrast to the people of speculative theology (kalam) - those who put philosophy and human reasoning above hadith, and in contrast to the people of opinion.^[R6]

Ahl al-Athar: because, after the Qur'an and Sunnah, they follow the reports transmitted from the Companions and Tabi'un, in contrast to the people of opinion.^[R7]

The Saved Group: from the hadith of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him: "The Children of Israel split into seventy-one groups, and my nation will split into seventy-two groups. All of them are in the Fire except one, and it is the Jama'ah."^[R8]

Explanations

^[E1] Meaning the words of the Companions and the Tabi'un.

^[E2] Meaning being safe from innovations and doubts.

^[E3] Meaning submitting to the revealed texts.

References

^[R4] Majmu' al-Fatawa, 3/380.

^[R5] Al-Hujjah fi Bayan al-Mahajjah, 1/259.

^[R6] Aswad ibn Salim said: "Hold to the transmitted reports and stick to them. I met the people of knowledge and they disliked Abu Hanifah's opinion and criticised it." Al-Sunnah by Abd Allah ibn Ahmad, 1/224.

^[R7] Muhammad ibn Yazid al-Mustamli said that a man asked Ahmad ibn Hanbal, "Should I write books of opinion?" He replied, "Do not. Hold to the reports and hadith." Al-Jami' li-'Uloom al-Imam Ahmad - Usul al-Fiqh, 5/156.

^[R8] Sunan Ibn Majah, 5/130, ed. al-Arna'ut.

The Victorious Group: from the saying of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him: "A group from my nation will continue to be victorious. Those who abandon them will not harm them until the Hour comes."^{[R9][E4]}

Groups Attributed to the Sunnah

There is no doubt that every group in the world claims that the truth is with it.^[E5]

For this reason, many groups describe themselves as Sunni. The following is a short overview of their main principles.

Ahl al-Ra'y - The People of Opinion

This is a school of fiqh that relied heavily on rational reasoning when deriving rulings, while having less knowledge of prophetic hadith. This led them to oppose many hadiths, so they relied on qiyas (analogy), istihsan (preferring a ruling for a reason the jurist sees as stronger), and al-masalih al-mursalah (unrestricted considerations of public interest) in issuing rulings. It is one of the well-known four schools, but its broad use of opinion and its frequent disagreement with hadith made it a target of criticism from Ahl al-Hadith.

Among its most prominent scholars are Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man and scholars of his school.

Explanations

^[E4] Their victory does not mean that they must always have political or physical power. They may be harmed or imprisoned while remaining victorious by holding to, teaching, and defending the truth.

^[E5] This excludes some recent deviant groups: some claimed that truth can be multiple, while others claimed that it has been lost. Examples given are Ahmad al-Tayyib, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad al-Hasan al-Diddu, and their followers.

References

^[R9] Sunan Ibn Majah, 1/5, ed. al-Arna'ut. The hadith occurs in the two Sahihs without the word "victorious"; this wording matches the title being discussed.

The Murji'ah

Irja' means delaying or putting something back. The Murji'ah are those who hold that a person's faith can be valid without bodily actions. This goes against Ahl al-Sunnah, who say that faith is made up of speech, action, and belief.

The Murji'ah are of several kinds:

- **Murji'at al-Jahmiyyah:** they hold that a person's faith is complete merely by knowing Allah and believing in Him. Among their leading figures are Jahm ibn Safwan and Abu Bakr al-Baqillani.
- **Murji'at al-Karramiyyah:** they hold that faith is simply saying the two testimonies with the tongue. Their leading figure is Muhammad ibn Karram al-Sijistani.
- **Murji'at al-Fuqaha' (the Hanafis):** they hold that faith is in the heart and tongue, without actions being part of it. Their leading figure is Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man ibn Thabit.
- **"Salafi Murji'ah":** they hold that faith is speech, action, and belief, but that abandoning action does not remove a person from faith. Among their leading figures are Nasir al-Din al-Albani^[R10] and Rabi' al-Madkhali^[E6].

Explanations

[E6] His statements on this subject are inconsistent, and he may have left this position.

References

[R10] Al-Albani said: "The Salaf distinguished between faith and action. They made action a condition of completeness in faith and did not make it a condition for validity, in contrast to the Khawarij." Jami' Turath al-'Allamah al-Albani fi al-'Aqidah, 4/52. Al-Fawzan also said: "The Murji'ah say that faith is belief in the heart only and that actions are not part of it. Some of them say that actions are a condition of completeness." Sharh 'Aqidat al-Imam al-Mujaddid Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, p. 135.

The Khawarij

They are a group that began to appear near the end of Uthman's rule and became prominent during the rule of Ali ibn Abi Talib. They were called Khawarij because they rebelled against Uthman and Ali, or because they took up the sword against the Muslims. The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "A people will come out who recite the Qur'an but it will not pass beyond their throats. They will pass out of the religion as an arrow passes through its target. They will kill the people of Islam and leave the idol worshippers."^{[R11][E7]}

The Jahmiyyah

They are the followers of Jahm ibn Safwan. They deny the attributes of Allah and interpret the verses about them away from their apparent meaning. They say that Allah is everywhere, deny that Allah will be seen on the Day of Resurrection, define faith as belief in the heart without action, say that the names of Allah are created, and say that the Qur'an is Allah's speech but is created. Among their best-known leaders are Jahm ibn Safwan and al-Ja'd ibn Dirham.

The Mu'tazilah

They are a branch of the Jahmiyyah, except that they affirm that Allah has many names,^[E8] and they deny many matters reported about the Day of Resurrection, such as the Scale and the Hawd, and major signs of the Hour such as the Dajjal.

They disagreed over where their Lord is: one group says He is everywhere, while another says He is in no place. Among their leading figures are Bishr al-Marisi, Ibn Abi Du'ad, al-Qadi Abd al-Jabbar, and al-Zamakhshari.

Explanations

^[E7] Merely criticising a government does not by itself make someone a Khariji. The Prophetic signs of the Khawarij include turning their violence against Muslims while leaving idol worshippers.

^[E8] In contrast to the earliest Jahmis.

References

^[R11] Sunan al-Nasa'i, 7/118.

The Ibadis

The Ibadis are a group from the Khawarij that adopted Mu'tazili beliefs. They arose through Abd Allah ibn Ibad al-Tamimi. Among their main principles is that a person who dies without repenting from a sin will remain in the Fire forever, while in this world he is still treated as a Muslim. They have their own school of fiqh, known as Ibadi fiqh, and a book they regard as the soundest book of hadith, *Musnad al-Rabi' ibn Habib*, which appears to be fabricated. They count Jabir ibn Zayd among their leaders, but he was free of them. Among their leading figures are Abd Allah ibn Ibad and al-Warjalani, and their contemporary head is Ahmad al-Khalili.

The Ash'aris

The Ash'aris are a group that grew out of the Mu'tazilah. They differed from them by affirming seven, thirteen, or twenty attributes of Allah, while their method of affirming those attributes still does not agree with the method of Ahl al-Sunnah. Even the attributes they say they affirm are not affirmed in the same sense. For example, they treat hearing and sight as knowledge rather than as distinct attributes by which Allah hears sounds and sees visible things. On this account, a sound could be called 'seen' and a visible thing 'heard' because both exist; likewise, they say that Allah already 'saw' an action before it occurred rather than that He sees it when it comes into existence. Thus hearing and sight are reduced in reality to knowledge. They are named after Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and became very widespread because of their closeness to rulers. They hold that Allah is not in a place and that affirming the Face, Hands, and similar attributes would resemble Allah to His creation. They are divided into those who leave the meaning to Allah and those who interpret it.

Ash'ari Tafwid

They adopt what is called "leaving the meaning to Allah" in texts about Allah's attributes. They say that if Qur'anic or prophetic texts mentioning Allah's Hand, Face, or rising over the Throne are accepted in their apparent meaning, this would resemble Allah to creation. They therefore reject the apparent meaning and leave the intended meaning to Allah. For example, regarding "the Hand of Allah," they say Allah knows what He meant by it, but it is not a hand. Among their prominent figures was Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni after he left ta'wil and moved to Ash'ari tafwid.

Ash'ari Ta'wil

They interpret texts about Allah's attributes in order, as they claim, to avoid resemblance. They give the texts meanings other than their apparent meanings, such as interpreting "He rose over" as "He took control," and "the Hand of Allah" as His power. Ahl al-Sunnah call them *muharrifah* - those who deliberately alter the meaning - because they do this deliberately rather than simply misunderstanding the text. Among their prominent figures is Ibn Furak.

Groups That Grew Out of Ash'arism

- **Al-Ahbash:** a group that appeared in the twentieth century through Abd Allah al-Harari al-Habashi. They emphasise Ash'ari creed and Sufism, took hostility toward Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan from the Shi'ah, and applied statements from some Ash'ari scholars declaring Ahl al-Sunnah unbelievers. They also declared Ash'aris who disagreed with them over declaring Ahl al-Sunnah unbelievers to be misguided, which caused disagreement between them. Their shaykh had many strange fatwas, including not paying zakah on money and allowing people to watch pornographic films.
- **Al-Kawthariyyah:** an extreme Ash'ari trend inclined toward declaring opposing Muslims unbelievers, though they may not always apply the judgement to particular individuals. Their followers recently required books to have chains of transmission like hadith in order to be accepted, while not applying that condition to books that agree with their own doctrine. Their imam also criticised many early hadith scholars.

Hanbali Tafwid

This refers to a group of Hanbali jurists who adopted tafwid in texts about Allah's attributes. They differ from Ash'ari tafwid: the Ash'aris first reject the apparent meaning and then say, "We do not know what was intended." The Hanbali mufawwidah do not necessarily reject the apparent meaning. For example, regarding "the Hand of Allah," they may say it could mean a hand that belongs to Him, His power, or His favour.

The Maturidis

They are the followers of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi. They resemble the Ash'aris in interpreting Allah's attributes, but differ from them in some questions of divine decree and faith.

The Sufis

They focus on spirituality and turning away from worldly life and use particular methods of worship, especially forms of remembrance. Their earliest members had goodness, but Sufism became fertile ground for innovations and led them into misguidance, until Sufism became a sign of innovations and superstitions.

Salafiyyah

These are people who call for returning to the understanding of Islam held by the righteous early Muslims. The term may be used for Ahl al-Sunnah generally, or for particular groups that use the name. More than one group uses the Salafi label:

- **A modern current that appeared around 1400 AH:** some members may oppose their own stated principle of returning to the Salaf by insisting on their own readings of the Qur'an and Sunnah even when those readings oppose the practice of the Salaf, or even a transmitted consensus that rejects them. Examples include saying that wine is pure, placing the hands on the chest in prayer, and allowing a person without wudu to touch the mushaf. In creed they may use tafwid. They strongly stress authentic hadith but may treat weak hadith as if it were rejected or fabricated, which does not agree with the method of the Salaf. They also strongly oppose innovations, but may make practical innovations such as celebrating the Mawlid seem more serious than doctrinal innovations such as changing the meanings of Allah's attributes.
- **Al-Jamiyyah:** named after Muhammad Aman al-Jami. This school strongly stresses hearing and obeying rulers and not rebelling against them - and this is correct - but gives the subject such weight that some make disagreement over it more serious than disagreement over Allah's attributes. Some may even label a person a Khariji merely for publicly criticising a sin in a country when the rulers permit that sin.

- **Al-Madakhilah** are similar to the Jamiyyah, except that they declare any critic of Rabi' al-Madkhali an innovator and oppose him. They later split after their leading figures disagreed with Rabi'.
- **Al-Haddadiyyah:** named after Mahmud al-Haddad al-Misri, who disagreed with Rabi'. Rabi' did not declare Ash'ari scholars such as al-Nawawi and al-Izz ibn Abd al-Salam innovators, while Mahmud declared them unbelievers. Statements declaring or implying that al-Albani, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn Taymiyyah were innovators or unbelievers are also attributed to him.
- **Al-Musa'fiqah:** a label that appeared after the dispute between Muhammad ibn Hadi al-Madkhali and Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali. Muhammad called Rabi's supporters "al-Sa'afiqah," and the other side replied by calling his followers "al-Musa'fiqah." Their disputes centred on declaring a number of contemporary people innovators.
- **Al-Sa'afiqah:** those who remained with Rabi' after his split with Muhammad ibn Hadi.
- **Al-Mudajjinah:** a trend among people who call themselves Salafi and strongly defend Ash'ari scholars. This led them to defend interpreting Allah's attributes and even seeking help from other than Allah in defence of those scholars. They also search for slips and mistakes among the Salaf and even the Companions. They attribute innovated or unbelieving statements and actions to them in order to put them on the same level as Ash'aris, and they discourage people from reading Salafi books of creed.
- **"False Atharis" / al-Ajrudiyyah:** they share with the previous group the practice of attributing innovation to many early scholars of the Salaf and Ahl al-Sunnah, including al-Bukhari, Muslim, Ibn Khuzaymah, and Ibn Taymiyyah. The difference is that the previous group excuses them and still calls them Ahl al-Sunnah, whereas this group declares them unbelievers because they regard them as innovators. By this logic only a very small number of Muslims may remain Muslim in their view, because they also declare anyone who refuses to declare their targets unbelievers to be an unbeliever. They themselves differ greatly over takfir, tabdi', their rules, and their judgements on particular people.
- **Al-Sururiyyah:** a group that combines Salafi thought in creed with the methodology of the Muslim Brotherhood.

- **Jihadi Salafiyyah:** they regard jihad as the means of changing the poor religious condition in Arab countries and claim to seek rule by Allah's law through fighting rulers who replace Allah's law. Yet they do not apply Allah's law when judging opponents over Allah's attributes and the definition of faith, while fighting rulers over political laws.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is a political Islamic organisation founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna in 1928. It claims to seek a complete Islamic system based on the Shari'ah, while many of its statements support democracy, and this is what it practised during periods of rule in Egypt and Turkey. It is known for its tight organisation and involvement in political and da'wah work. They are among those who water down matters of creed. They give little attention to creed and regard its issues as things that divide rather than unite. One of their principles is bringing people together and leaving disagreements aside, even when those disagreements reach matters of disbelief.

As for the people of truth, they are free of partisan labels. Ibn Abbas said: "Whoever accepts one of these newly invented names has removed the collar of Islam from his neck."^[R12]

Maymun ibn Mihran said: "Beware of everything that is called by a name other than Islam."^[R13]

Ibn Qudamah said: "Everyone who takes a name other than Islam and the Sunnah is an innovator."^[R14]

What Are Their Religious Sources?

First: Revelation

Ahl al-Sunnah take their religion from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Both are revelation.

References

^[R12] Al-Ibanah al-Kubra by Ibn Battah, 1/354.

^[R13] Al-Ibanah al-Kubra by Ibn Battah, 1/342.

^[R14] Lum'at al-I'tiqad, p. 41.

The Qur'an

They believe in the Qur'an and believe that it is complete and perfect. Nothing has been added to it, nothing has been removed from it, and it has not been changed. ^[E9]

They believe that the Qur'an is one. ^[E10]

They believe that it is the speech of Allah: Allah truly spoke it with words and letters. ^[E11]

They also believe that it has authentic recitations. ^[E12]

Allah sent it down in seven forms from the speech of the Arabs. Differences may be in pronunciation, such as reading *al-mu'minun* with a clearly pronounced hamzah or easing it. Some differences are in wording in a way that adds meaning, such as "Master of the Day of Judgement" and "King of the Day of Judgement." All of this is from Allah, and all of the Qur'an is proof.

The Sunnah

Here, *Sunnah* means the hadith of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. It is revelation that he received from Allah and explained through his words, actions, and approvals. ^[E13]

It is the second source of Islamic law.

Hadith is divided into several types:

1. **Mutawatir:** a report established from the Messenger of Allah through a large group narrating from a large group throughout the chain. It is among the strongest levels of authenticity.
2. **Sahih:** a report established from the Messenger of Allah after examining the narrators and the routes by which it was transmitted.
3. **Hasan:** a report established from the Messenger of Allah, but some of its narrators are not as precise in memory.

Explanations

^[E9] This is in contrast to the Rafidah.

^[E10] This is in contrast to Ash'aris, who hold to two forms of the Qur'an in this issue.

^[E11] This is in contrast to the Jahmiyyah and groups that grew out of them.

^[E12] This is contrasted with the Rafidah. A report is also cited from Ja'far al-Sadiq: 'The Qur'an is one, sent down from One, but differences came from the narrators.' Al-Kafi, 2:630.

^[E13] An approval means that he saw or heard something and did not forbid it.

These first three categories are accepted as proof.

4. **Da'if:** a report not established from the Messenger of Allah because of weak memory in some narrators or because some narrators are **unknown**. If the weakness is slight, the report agrees with established principles, and it concerns encouragement toward good deeds, it may be accepted. Otherwise no ruling is built upon it.
5. **Mawdu':** a fabricated lie. It may not be narrated except to warn people against it.

The Difference Between Mutawatir and Ahad

Every report that is not mutawatir is called *ahad*. In this usage, an ahad report has one, two, or three routes of transmission, though scholars differ over the exact number. Ahad reports make up the great majority of prophetic hadith.

Ahl al-Sunnah accept authentic ahad hadiths. They use them in fiqh, in contrast to the "oppositionists,"^[E14] and they use them in creed, in contrast to the Mu'tazilah and those who followed them.

Second: Consensus

Ijma' is the agreement of the scholars of the Muslim community in a particular age upon a religious ruling. It is proof because the truth is not lost from the Muslim community.

Consensus is of three kinds:

- **Certain consensus:** there is no reasonable possibility that a recognised scholar opposed it. Opposing this kind amounts to disbelief because it is certain opposition to the religion.^[E15]
- **Likely consensus:** it is possible that an opponent existed, or an opposing view exists but is not considered strong. It should not be opposed, and a person who opposes it may be declared an innovator or blamed.
- **Claimed consensus:** a consensus claimed by some scholars but not established, either because opponents existed or because the issue never became widespread, especially in later periods. This is not binding.

Explanations

[E14] They call themselves Qur'anists.

[E15] This is a general ruling. A new Muslim, or someone who genuinely does not yet understand the matter, is not automatically judged like one who knowingly rejects a certain consensus.

Third: Analogy

Qiyas means giving a new case the same ruling as a case mentioned in revelation because the same reason for the ruling exists in both. Al-Shafi'i said:

"The foundation is the Qur'an or the Sunnah. If neither is found, then analogy is made upon them."^[R15]

This principle is used only when needed. Imam Ahmad said: "I asked al-Shafi'i about analogy and he said: it is a necessity."^[R16]

They do not set analogy against a hadith.^[R17]

When an authentic hadith comes, they accept it even when it goes against an analogy.

Fourth: Reports from the Early Muslims^[E16]

These are the statements of the Companions and the Tabi'un.

The Statements of the Companions

Their statements are treated as proof for two reasons. First, a Companion may act upon a hadith that reached him but did not reach us. Second, the Companions knew the Shari'ah, the Prophet's guidance, and the Arabic language better than later people, so their judgement has greater priority.

If the Companions agree upon a matter, we may not oppose them. If they differ, we take the view closest to the Qur'an and Sunnah and do not introduce a view outside their positions.

Al-Awza'i said: "Knowledge is what came from the Companions of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Whatever is not that is not knowledge."^[R18]

Explanations

^[E16] Qiyas is listed first because its status is agreed upon, while athar as an independent proof is disputed. In application, however, the Companions' athar is generally given precedence over qiyas.

References

^[R15] Adab al-Shafi'i wa-Manaqibuh by Ibn Abi Hatim, p. 177.

^[R16] Tarikh Naysabur: Tabaqat Shuyukh al-Hakim, compilation of al-Bayruti, p. 442.

^[R17] Al-Shafi'i said: "We do not leave a hadith from the Messenger of Allah because an analogy enters into it." Al-Umm, 7/208, Dar al-Fikr edition.

^[R18] Jami' Bayan al-'Ilm wa-Fadlih (1420).

Salih ibn Kaysan said that he and al-Zuhri met while seeking knowledge. They agreed to write down the Sunnah and wrote what had come from the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. Al-Zuhri then said, "Let us write what came from his Companions, for it is Sunnah." Salih replied, "It is not Sunnah, so we will not write it." Al-Zuhri wrote it, Salih did not, and Salih said that he lost out.^[R19]

The Statements of the Tabi'un

The words of the Tabi'un are not at the same level as the words of the Companions, but they should not simply be set aside. Imam Ahmad was asked whether a person is required to take a ruling reported from a Tabi'i when nothing from the Prophet is known on that matter. He replied, "No, but hardly anything comes from a Tabi'i except that something like it can be found from the Companions of the Prophet - meaning, in what I have."^[R20]

The general method is that Ahl al-Sunnah do not oppose an agreed statement of the Companions. When the Companions differ, they do not create an entirely new view outside their positions, except where a view combines elements already found in their statements. The same general approach is applied to the Tabi'un.

Fifth: The Words of Scholars

The words of scholars are not themselves a source of revelation. The rule is:

"Evidence is brought for a scholar's words; the scholar's words are not themselves the evidence."^[R21]

Who Are Their Scholars?

Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah divide scholars into levels according to time, knowledge, and country. I will use the chronological division.

References

[R19] Tarikh Ibn Khaythamah (4925), with a sound chain to Salih.

[R20] Masa'il Abi Dawud (1790).

[R21] Ibn Uthaymin, audio commentary on Zad al-Mustaqni', 1/2125.

Scholars According to Time

The Salaf

The Salaf are divided into four generations.

1. The Companions

A Companion is anyone who met the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, while believing in him and died upon that faith.

They include the four caliphs: Abu Bakr (d. 13 AH), Umar (d. 23 AH), Uthman (d. 35 AH), and Ali (d. 40 AH).

They also include the four famous *Abd Allahs*: Abd Allah ibn Amr ibn al-As (d. 65 AH), Abd Allah ibn Abbas (d. 68 AH), Abd Allah ibn Umar (d. 73 AH), and Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 73 AH).^[E17]

Al-Ithyubi put them into verse: *If you wish to know the famous Abd Allahs: Ibn al-Zubayr, Ibn Amr, Ibn Abbas, and Ibn Umar. Whoever names others has erred; some mistakenly omit Ibn al-Zubayr.*

Other prominent Companions include Mu'adh ibn Jabal (d. 18 AH), Abu al-Darda' (d. 32 AH), Ubayy ibn Ka'b (d. 22 AH), Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud (d. 32 AH), Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman (d. 36 AH), Zayd ibn Thabit (d. 45 AH), Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 44 AH or later), Imran ibn Husayn (d. 52 AH), Abu Hurayrah (d. 59 AH), and Anas ibn Malik (d. 93 AH). Among the women: A'ishah (d. 58 AH).

2. The Tabi'un

A Tabi'i is a person who accompanied a Companion. Merely seeing a Companion is not enough, unlike the definition of a Companion in relation to the Prophet.^[E18]

Explanations

^[E17] Ibn Mas'ud is not counted among these four because he died in 32 AH and the four Abd Allahs belong to the same later generation.

^[E18] This definition is disputed; some scholars count a person as a Tabi'i merely for seeing a Companion.

Among them are the seven jurists of Madinah who lived in the same period: Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib (d. 94 AH), Urwah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 94 AH), Ubayd Allah ibn Abd Allah ibn Utbah (d. 98 AH), Kharijah ibn Zayd (d. 99 AH), al-Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (d. 107 AH), and Sulayman ibn Yasar (d.

107 AH). The seventh is disputed: Abu Bakr ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Harith (d. 94 AH), Abu Salamah ibn Abd al-Rahman (d. 94 AH), or Salim ibn Abd Allah ibn Umar (d. 106 AH).

Their names were also put into verse: *Kharijah, al-Qasim, then Urwah; Sulayman, Ubayd Allah, and Sa'id. The seventh is disputed: Abu Salamah, Salim, or Abu Bakr - the disagreement remains. Another verse says: "If asked who the seven oceans of knowledge are, say: Ubayd Allah, Urwah, al-Qasim, Sa'id, Abu Bakr, Sulayman, and Kharijah."*

Other jurists of Madinah include Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali (d. 94 AH) and Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 101 AH).

Other Tabi'un include Amir ibn Abd Qays, al-Husayn ibn Ali, Alqamah ibn Qays, Masruq ibn al-Ajda', al-Rabi' ibn Khuthaym, Abd Allah ibn Salamah, al-Aswad ibn Yazid, Shurayh the judge, Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Layla, Mutarrif ibn Abd Allah ibn al-Shikhkhir, Ibrahim al-Nakha'i, Abd Allah ibn Shaddad ibn al-Had, al-Sha'bi, Mujahid ibn Jabr, Abu Qilabah, Ikrimah the freedman of Ibn Abbas, Tawus ibn Kaysan, al-Hasan al-Basri, Qatadah ibn Di'amah, al-Zuhri, and Malik ibn Dinar.

3. The Followers of the Tabi'un

These are those who accompanied a Tabi'i. Among those listed are Ma'mar ibn Rashid (d. 153 AH), al-Awza'i (d. 157 AH), Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161 AH), Hammad ibn Salamah (d. 167 AH), al-Hasan ibn Salih (d. 169 AH), al-Layth ibn Sa'd (d. 175 AH), Malik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH), Hammad ibn Zayd (d. 179 AH), Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181 AH), al-Fudayl ibn Iyad (d. 187 AH), Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d. 197 AH), Sufyan ibn Uyaynah (d. 198 AH), Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Qattan (d. 198 AH), and Abd al-Rahman ibn Mahdi (d. 198 AH).

4. The Followers of the Followers

These are those who accompanied followers of the Tabi'un. Among them are al-Shafi'i, Muhammad ibn Idris (d. 204 AH); Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH)^[E19];

Yahya ibn Ma'in (d. 233 AH); Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH); Ishaq ibn Rahawayh (d. 238 AH); Abd al-Razzaq ibn Hammam (d. 211 AH); Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi (d. 204 AH); Ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 235 AH); Hannad ibn al-Sari (d. 243 AH); Qutaybah ibn Sa'id (d. 240 AH); al-Humaydi (d. 219 AH);

Muhammad ibn Bashshar (d. 252 AH); Muhammad ibn al-Muthanna (d. 252 AH); Abu Khaythamah Zuhayr ibn Harb (d. 234 AH); Ibn Majah (d. 273 AH);

Abu Zur'ah al-Razi (d. 264 AH); Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 277 AH); al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma'il (d. 256 AH); Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 261 AH); and al-Tirmidhi (d. 279 AH).

Everyone named in these four generations is a recognised scholar whose words are taken seriously by Ahl al-Sunnah, Ash'aris, and Maturidis.

Those Who Came After Them

Later scholars are divided into three periods:

- **The early later scholars:** those who learned from the followers of the followers. The exact end of this period is difficult to set, but the closest estimate is around 500 AH.
- **Contemporary scholars:** people alive now and those whom people of our present generation personally met.
- **The later scholars:** those between the early period and the contemporary period.

After the followers of the followers, jurists became associated with their schools of fiqh. Schools multiplied and governments changed, and this led to considerable mixing. Ash'ari names became especially prominent because political power came into their hands.

Explanations

[E19] In this book, 'Imam Ahmad' refers to Ahmad ibn Hanbal unless another Ahmad is specifically named.

Some Well-Known Ash'ari Scholars^[E20]

Among them are: Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, imam of the school (d. 324 AH); Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, imam of the Maturidis (d. 333 AH); Ibn Furak (d. 403 AH); Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 403 AH); Abu Mansur al-Baghdadi (d. 429 AH); Ibn Battal (d. 449 AH); al-Bayhaqi (d. 458 AH); the Sufi Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 465 AH); the mufasssir al-Wahidi (d. 468 AH); Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi (d. 476 AH); Abu Muhammad al-Juwayni (d. 478 AH); Abd al-Malik Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni (d. 478 AH); the Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH); Abu Ishaq al-Isfarayini (d. 516 AH); Ibn al-Arabi al-Maliki (d. 543 AH); Qadi Iyad al-Maliki (d. 544 AH); al-Shahrastani (d. 548 AH); the mufasssir Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606 AH); Sayf al-Din al-Amidi (d. 631 AH); the Sufi al-Izz ibn Abd al-Salam (d. 660 AH); the mufasssir al-Qurtubi (d. 671 AH); al-Nawawi (d. 676 AH); al-Qarafi (d. 684 AH); the mufasssir al-Baydawi (d. 685 AH); Ibn al-Rif'ah (d. 710 AH); the linguist Ibn Manzur (d. 711 AH); the jurist Ibn Jama'ah (d. 733 AH); Taqi al-Din al-Subki (d. 756 AH); Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 756 AH); al-Shatibi (d. 790 AH); the historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH); Ibrahim al-Bajuri, Shaykh of al-Azhar (d. 825 AH); the hadith scholar Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 852 AH); al-Ayni (d. 855 AH); Zarruq (d. 899 AH); the hadith scholar al-Sakhawi (d. 902 AH); the Sufi Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH); Zakariyya al-Ansari (d. 926 AH); Ibrahim al-Laqqani (d. 1041 AH); al-Zurqani (d. 1122 AH); Ahmad al-Dardir (d. 1201 AH); the linguist Murtada al-Zabidi (d. 1205 AH); the Hanafi Ibn Abidin (d. 1252 AH); and al-Sanusi (d. 1276 AH).

Their statements are not relied upon in matters of creed by Ahl al-Sunnah. In other sciences, their work is judged according to the subject. A linguist may be accepted in language but not followed when his linguistic discussion enters creed, such as when explaining "He rose over." A hadith scholar such as Ibn Hajar may be accepted in hadith, but we do not accept attacks on an Ahl al-Sunnah scholar's creed or similar doctrinal statements. A jurist may be used when accurately summarising earlier jurists or gathering the views of a school, but care is needed because some later jurists had limited hadith knowledge, naming al-Juwayni and al-Ghazali as examples.^[E21]

Explanations

[E20] Here, 'Ash'ari' is used loosely for the Ash'aris together with the Maturidis; Abu Mansur al-Maturidi is not being called an Ash'ari.

[E21] Ibn Hajar said that Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni rarely consulted even the famous hadith books, much less other works. Al-Ghazali also said of himself: "My stock in hadith is small." Taj al-Din al-Subki expressed surprise that al-Dhahabi mentioned Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Sayf al-Din al-Amidi in a book on weak narrators although neither was a transmitter of hadith.

Scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah

Among them are Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH); Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 277 AH); Harb al-Kirmani (d. 280 AH); Uthman ibn Sa'id al-Darimi (d. 280 AH); Abu Zur'ah al-Razi (d. 281 AH); Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 289 AH); al-Firyabi (d. 301 AH); al-Nasa'i (d. 303 AH); Ibn Surayj al-Baghdadi al-Shafi'i (d. 306 AH); Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 311 AH); Ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311 AH); Abu Bakr al-Khallal (d. 311 AH); Ibn al-Mundhir (d. 318 AH); Ibn Abi Hatim (d. 327 AH); al-Haddad (d. 345 AH); al-Ajurri (d. 360 AH); al-Tabarani (d. 360 AH); Abu Mansur al-Azhari (d. 370 AH); al-Daraqutni (d. 385 AH); Ibn Shahin (d. 385 AH); Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (d. 386 AH); Ibn Battah al-Ukbari (d. 387 AH); Ibn Mandah (d. 395 AH); Abu Ahmad al-Karaji (d. 360 AH); Ibn Abi Zamanin, the Maliki mufassir (d. 399 AH); Abu Hamid al-Isfarayini (d. 406 AH); Abu al-Qasim al-Lalaka'i (d. 418 AH); Ubayd Allah al-Sijzi (d. 444 AH); Abu Uthman al-Sabuni (d. 459 AH); Ibn Abd al-Barr (d. 463 AH); Ibn al-Banna' al-Hanbali (d. 471 AH); Abu al-Qasim al-Zanjani (d. 471 AH); Abu Isma'il Abd Allah al-Harawi al-Ansari (d. 481 AH); Abu al-Hasan al-Hakkari (d. 486 AH); Abu Muhammad al-Baghawi, the mufassir and hadith scholar (d. 516 AH); Abu al-Qasim Isma'il al-Asbahani (d. 535 AH); Adi ibn Musafir (d. 557 AH); Ibn Hubayrah (d. 560 AH); Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561 AH); Abu Tahir al-Silafi (d. 576 AH); Abd al-Ghani al-Maqdisi (d. 600 AH); Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi (d. 608 AH); Muwaffaq al-Din Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi (d. 620 AH); Abu al-Qasim al-Dashti (d. 661 AH); Ibn Shaykh al-Hizamiyyin (d. 711 AH); Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH); Alam al-Din al-Birzali (d. 739 AH); Jamal al-Din al-Mizzi (d. 742 AH); Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi (d. 748 AH); Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH); Ibn Kathir (d. 774 AH); Ibn Abi al-Izz (d. 792 AH); Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali (d. 795 AH); Ibn al-Mibrad al-Hanbali (d. 909 AH); Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206 AH); Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1242 AH); Abd Allah Aba Butayn (d. 1282 AH); and Abd al-Rahman ibn Hasan Al al-Shaykh (d. 1285 AH).

We love these later scholars, trust them, and regard them as our scholars, while not placing them on the same level as the Salaf. Their words are measured against the words of the Salaf. If it becomes clear that one of them opposed the Salaf in a statement, the statement is rejected while the scholar is still respected, given a good assumption, and the Salaf are followed.

What Are Their Schools of Fiqh?

Schools of fiqh are scholarly traditions that explain and derive practical rulings from the Qur'an and Sunnah through particular rules and principles. Each school has its own method in weighing evidence and deciding how much to rely on sources such as the statements of the Companions and analogy.

Schools of fiqh are different from theological sects. Theological sects concern beliefs such as Allah's oneness and attributes, the meaning of faith and disbelief, prophethood, resurrection, and divine decree.

Those called Sunni in the broad sense belong to five schools of fiqh, of which four are famous because the fifth - the Zahiri school - has very few followers. The major schools are divided into two broad approaches: Ahl al-Hadith and Ahl al-Ra'y.^{[E22][R22]}

The School of Ahl al-Ra'y

This is the Hanafi school, named after Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta al-Farisi (d. 150 AH). It is known for extensive use of opinion and analogy.

Ibn al-Jawzi said: "The questions in which he opposed hadith are many."^[R23] He also said: "It is surprising that when he saw a hadith with no established basis he would leave analogy and incline toward it."^[R24]

Imam Ahmad said: "We left the people of opinion. They had many hadiths, but we did not write from them because they opposed hadith. None of them succeeds."^[R25]

Explanations

^[E22] Some scholars do not count Zahiri disagreement when it rejects qiyas, because qiyas is regarded as an agreed foundational proof; they treat such disagreement similarly to a Shi'i or Ibadi disagreement. The school nevertheless agrees with Ahl al-Sunnah in many general principles.

References

^[R22] Imam Ahmad is quoted as saying: "Ask the people of hadith; do not ask the people of opinion." Masa'il al-Imam Ahmad, narration of his son Abd Allah, p. 438.

^[R23] Al-Muntazam fi Tarikh al-Muluk wa-l-Umam, 8/138.

^[R24] Al-Muntazam, 8/143.

^[R25] Masa'il Ibn Hani' (1930).

The Schools of Ahl al-Hadith

They are three: the Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools. Each major imam learned from the one before him: Ahmad studied under al-Shafi'i, and al-Shafi'i studied under Malik. Their foundations are close to one another, especially their reliance on the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus, and analogy, without expanding analogy as widely as the Hanafi school.

The Maliki School

It is named after Imam Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi.

Among its important principles is taking the practice of the people of Madinah as evidence, because they were the students and children of the Companions in that period. At times they give this practice priority over an isolated hadith because they regard established practice in Madinah as a form of living Sunnah. In their method, practical transmission may be stronger than a verbal report that could have been abrogated or contain a weakness in its chain. ^[E23]

Imam Malik also uses mursals as evidence. ^[E24] He also uses the statement of a Companion as evidence, and he frequently cites Umar and Ibn Umar, may Allah be pleased with them both, in his Muwatta'.

The Shafi'i School

It is named after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i. He summarised his ranking of knowledge as follows:

Explanations

^[E23] Companions also settled in Iraq, Egypt, and elsewhere, so a hadith or practice could be preserved outside Madinah without being known there. An authentic hadith is therefore not set aside merely because it differs from Madinan practice, while Malik's reasoning remains strong.

^[E24] A mural report is a Tabi'i narrating directly from the Prophet without naming the Companion. The majority count it as weak because a Tabi'i may have received the report from another Tabi'i, though some mural reports are accepted under additional conditions.

"The first level is the Book and the Sunnah when the Sunnah is established. The second is consensus where there is no Book or Sunnah. The third is the statement of one of the Companions of the Prophet when no Companion is known to oppose him. The fourth is the disagreement of the Companions of the Prophet. The fifth is analogy upon one of these levels. Nothing else is turned to while the Book and Sunnah are present. Knowledge is taken from the highest level available."^[R26]

The Hanbali School

It is named after Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani. Imam Ahmad agreed with many of al-Shafi'i's principles and was especially known for his attention to and use of the statements of the Companions and Tabi'un.

What Are Their Books?

The strongest and most important source of Shari'ah for Ahl al-Sunnah is the Qur'an. Other groups place barriers between themselves and the Qur'an, such as making Greek-style reasoning the judge over the text, calling what conflicts with it metaphorical, or saying the Qur'an can only be explained by an authority they believe cannot make mistakes. Ahl al-Sunnah take the Qur'an according to its apparent meaning unless evidence requires another interpretation. Where such evidence exists, the text is understood according to that evidence.

The books are divided into three main categories: books of hadith and athar, books of fiqh, and books of supporting sciences.

First: Tafsir

Books of tafsir can be divided into:

1. **Narrative tafsir:** books that transmit explanations from the Salaf.
2. **Explanatory tafsir:** books in which the commentator explains the text in his own words, while still making use of transmitted material.

References

[R26] Al-Umm by al-Shafi'i, 7/280, Dar al-Fikr edition.

3. **Works combining narration and explanation:** the writer transmits from earlier scholars and also explains the text.

For Ahl al-Sunnah, the proof in tafsir is what is authentically established from the righteous Salaf and what they agreed upon. Not everything quoted in a tafsir book is proof. Tafsir authors, especially those who collected reports, often gathered both material they accepted and material they did not accept.

Among the tafsir works listed are:

- **Tafsir Muqatil ibn Sulayman** (d. 150 AH): the earliest complete tafsir of the Qur'an.
- **Tafsir Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani** (d. 211 AH): a transmitted tafsir that relies heavily on Qatadah ibn Di'amah.
- **Tafsir al-Tabari** (d. 310 AH): al-Tabari was one of the leading scholars of tafsir. He gathered transmitted explanations and discussed the different views and the Arabic language.
- **Tafsir Ibn Abi Zamanin** (d. 399 AH): contains his own explanation and many reports from Yahya ibn Abi Salam.
- **Tafsir al-Baghawi** (d. 516 AH): a Sunni tafsir that gathers statements of the Salaf without full chains and adds explanation. A few passages may sound problematic in creed, such as explaining "seeking the Face of Allah" as "seeking Allah's reward." This is explanation of what the verse leads to and intends, not an innovated denial of Allah's Face.
- **Tafsir Ibn Kathir** (d. 774 AH): broadly similar in method to al-Baghawi.
- **Tafsir al-Sa'di** (d. 1376 AH): a concise tafsir.

There are also two kinds of works a student may come across. First, incomplete tafsirs, such as the tafsir of Ibn al-Mundhir (d. 319 AH) and Ibn Abi Hatim (d. 327 AH), which were not placed in the main list despite the standing of their authors. Second, later compilations that gather a scholar's tafsir statements from different works and present them as a single book, such as compilations called the Tafsir of Mujahid, Tafsir of Sufyan al-Thawri, and Tafsir of Ibn Taymiyyah.

Tafsir Works That Need Special Caution

- **The tafsir attributed to al-Tabarani** (d. 360 AH): al-Tabarani himself was a major Hanbali scholar, but the tafsir attributed to him is actually by Abu Bakr al-Haddad, a Maturidi who died around 700 AH.
- ***Al-Durr al-Manthur fi al-Tafsir bi-l-Ma'thur* by al-Suyuti**: this work gathers explanations from the Salaf, but includes both established and unestablished reports while omitting their chains. Opponents of Ahl al-Sunnah may cite weak material from it against them, so caution is needed.

Second: Books of Hadith and Athar

These are books that gather prophetic hadiths and reports from the early Muslims with their chains of transmission.

Hadith means what is transmitted from the actions, descriptions, and approvals of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him.

Athar means what is transmitted from the words and actions of the righteous Salaf. The word *hadith* may sometimes be used for an athar, and the word *athar* may sometimes be used for a prophetic hadith.

Isnad is the chain of narrators who transmitted a report.

For example:

"Abu Abd al-Rahman Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal narrated to us. He said: my father Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal ibn Hilal ibn Asad narrated to me from his book. He said: Abd Allah ibn Numayr narrated to us. He said: Isma'il - meaning Ibn Abi Khalid - informed us, from Qays, who said: Abu Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him, stood, praised Allah, and then said: 'People, you read this verse: "Believers, take care of yourselves; those who go astray will not harm you when you are rightly guided." We heard the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, say: "When people see wrongdoing and do not change it, Allah may soon cover them all with His punishment."'"[R27]

References

[R27] Musnad Ahmad, 1/177, al-Risalah edition.

Abd Allah named the men through whom the hadith reached him. Their truthfulness, memory, weakness, or carelessness can be studied. Reports transmitted by trustworthy narrators from one another are accepted according to detailed conditions studied in the science of hadith.

The Most Important Hadith Collections

1. The Two Sahihs

The authors of these two books intended to gather only authentic hadiths. Scholars later criticised a very small number of narrations in them, roughly around half of one percent.

Sahih al-Bukhari: written by Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH). It is the most authentic book in Islam after the Book of Allah, and no religious group has a book attributed to its prophet that approaches it in authenticity.

It contains *mu'allaq* reports: reports in which al-Bukhari omits part or all of the chain. These do not fall under the hadiths that he authenticated according to the conditions of the main body of his book, so their authenticity must be checked separately.

Sahih Muslim: written by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi (d. 261 AH). It comes after al-Bukhari in rank. It has an introduction containing reports that are not all on the same conditions as the main body of the Sahih, so their authenticity must be checked separately.

2. The Four Sunan

These four books gather hadiths of rulings and creed but contain more weak material than the two Sahihs. They are: *Sunan Ibn Majah*, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, and *Sunan al-Nasa'i*.

When scholars say "the six books," they mean the two Sahihs together with these four Sunan collections.

Accordingly, if a hadith is fully connected in al-Bukhari^[E25] or occurs in the main body of Sahih Muslim rather than its introduction, it can be cited directly as evidence: "al-Bukhari narrated it in his Sahih" or "Muslim narrated it in his Sahih." If it is a mu'allaq report in al-Bukhari or appears in Muslim's introduction, it is described more precisely and its authenticity is checked.

3. The Remaining Books of the "Nine"

Alongside the six books, the expression "the nine books" adds three:

- ***Al-Muwatta' of Malik***: one of the earliest hadith books. It includes prophetic hadiths, statements of Umar and Ibn Umar, and the fiqh and practice of the people of Madinah. Most of it is authentic, but it also contains *balaghat*, where Malik says "It reached me" and gives no chain.
- ***Musnad al-Darimi***: by al-Darimi who died in 255 AH, not the later al-Darimi who died in 280 AH. It contains about 3,546 reports. Despite the title *Musnad*, it is arranged more like a Sunan work and gives particular attention to proofs of prophethood, chapters of creed, virtues of the Qur'an, and reports from the Companions and Tabi'un.
- ***Musnad Ahmad***: the largest hadith collection now available. It is arranged by the names of Companions and gathers their narrations. Imam Ahmad did not require every report to be authentic, but he generally did not include chains containing hidden technical defects.^[E26]

4. Other Works Whose Authors Required Authenticity

Several scholars wrote books in which they intended to include authentic material. Later scholars, however, did not accept their judgements at the same level as al-Bukhari and Muslim.

- ***Al-Muntaqa of Ibn al-Jarud*** (d. 307 AH): concerned mainly with legal hadiths. Most of it is authentic and only a small number of reports fall below hasan.

Explanations

^[E25] Meaning that the complete chain is given.

^[E26] A chain may be weak because one narrator is weak, while another chain may look outwardly sound but contain a hidden defect, such as a report being raised to the Prophet when it should stop at a Companion.

- ***Sahih Ibn Khuzaymah*** (d. 311 AH): only about a quarter survives. It contains some reports that are not authentic, though authenticity is dominant.
- ***Kitab al-Tawhid of Ibn Khuzaymah***: a section from his Sahih.
- ***Sahih Ibn Hibban***: its main difficulty is Ibn Hibban's leniency in declaring narrators trustworthy. Its original title is *al-Taqasim wa-l-Anwa'*, and it has a distinctive arrangement based on the fiqh of hadith.
- ***Al-Mustadrak of al-Hakim***: he tried to gather hadiths meeting the conditions of the two Sahihs. The book was weakened by his leniency with narrators, by his authenticating reports without enough attention to hidden defects, and by his death before fully revising the draft. The printed work therefore contains weak and even fabricated reports.
- ***Al-Ahadith al-Mukhtarah of Diya' al-Din al-Maqdisi*** (d. 643 AH): a later work. Most of its hadiths are between hasan and sahih, and its author sometimes includes reports he himself grades weak.

Third: Books of Creed

Sunni creed books are divided into seven types: concise creeds, books of transmitted reports, books mainly in the writer's own words, books combining reports and explanation, commentaries, poems, and books that should be approached with caution.

1. Concise Creeds

A concise creed is a short work gathering the main issues believed by Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah. Examples listed are:

1. The creed of Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH), especially concerning affirmation of Allah's attributes.
2. *Usul al-Sunnah* of al-Humaydi (d. 219 AH), placed at the end of his Musnad.
3. The creed of Qutaybah ibn Sa'id al-Thaqafi (d. 240 AH).
4. *Usul al-Sunnah* of Imam Ahmad (d. 241 AH).
5. *Sharh al-Sunnah* of Imam al-Muzani (d. 264 AH).
6. The creed of al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH).

7. The creed of Abu Zur'ah (d. 263 AH) and Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 277 AH).
8. The creed of Harb al-Kirmani (d. 280 AH), printed under titles including *Ijma' al-Salaf fi al-I'tiqad* and *al-Sunnah*. It is a section he called "The Statement on the Madhhab" inside his *Masa'il*.
9. *Sarih al-Sunnah* of Imam al-Tabari (d. 310 AH).
10. The introduction of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (d. 386 AH).

Concise creeds are numerous. Adil Al Hamdan gathered a collection of them in *al-Jami'*, and I gathered a group of them in *al-Durar al-Munaddadah*. Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab also have useful concise works, especially *al-Usul al-Thalathah* by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

2. Books Based Mainly on Transmission

These works mainly gather prophetic hadiths and statements of the Salaf:

1. *Al-Sunnah* of Harb al-Kirmani (d. 280 AH), a section of his larger *Masa'il*.
2. *Al-Sunnah* of Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 290 AH).
3. *Al-Qadar* of al-Firyabi (d. 301 AH).
4. *Al-Radd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah* of Muhammad ibn Ishaq Ibn Mandah (d. 395 AH).

To these may be added chapters inside hadith collections, such as the Book of Tawhid in Sahih al-Bukhari, the introduction of Ibn Majah, and the Book of Sunnah in Sunan Abi Dawud.

3. Books Mainly in the Author's Own Words

Sunni books are rarely free of transmitted evidence. Here, however, the main body of the work is the writer's explanation. These works resemble concise creed texts, except that they are longer and contain fuller discussion of the issues. Examples include:

1. *Al-Iman* by al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d. 224 AH), on disagreement over the reality of faith and a response to the Murji'ah.
2. *Al-Radd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah* by Imam Ahmad (d. 241 AH).
3. *Sharh al-Sunnah* by al-Barbahari (d. 329 AH).
4. *Aqidat al-Salaf wa-Ashab al-Hadith* by Abu Uthman al-Sabuni (d. 449 AH).
5. *Al-Sharh wa-l-Ibanah*, known as *al-Ibanah al-Sughra*, by Ibn Battah al-Ukbari (d. 387 AH).

6. The letter of al-Sijzi to the people of Zabid by Abu Nasr al-Sijzi (d. 444 AH).
7. *Al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad* by Abd al-Ghani al-Maqdisi (d. 600 AH).
8. *Al-Nasihah fi Sifat al-Rabb* by Ibn Shaykh al-Hizamiyyin (d. 711 AH).
9. The works of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH).
10. The works of Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH).
11. The works of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206 AH).

4. Books Combining Transmission and Explanation

These works quote hadith and athar with their chains while also containing substantial explanation from the writer. Examples:

1. *Khalq Af'al al-'Ibad* by al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH).
2. *Al-Radd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah* by Uthman ibn Sa'id al-Darimi (d. 280 AH).
3. *Al-Radd 'ala al-Marisi* by al-Darimi.
4. *Al-Ibanah al-Kubra* by Ibn Battah al-Ukbari (d. 387 AH).
5. *Usul al-Sunnah* by Ibn Abi Zamanin (d. 399 AH).
6. *Dhamm al-Kalam wa-Ahlihi* by Abu Isma'il al-Harawi (d. 481 AH).
7. *Al-'Arsh* by al-Dhahabi (d. 748 AH).
8. *Al-'Uluw* by al-Dhahabi.
9. *Sifat Rabb al-'Alamin* by Ibn al-Muhibb al-Samit (d. 789 AH).

5. Commentaries

Commentaries are very numerous, especially in modern times. One example named is *Ma'arij al-Qabul* by Hafiz al-Hakami, a commentary on his poem *Sullam al-Wusul*.

6. Poems on Creed

These are poems that gather questions of belief. They include:

1. A poem on the Sunnah by al-Hakam ibn Ma'bad al-Khuza'i (d. 295 AH).
2. *Al-Ha'iyyah* by Abu Bakr Ibn Abi Dawud (d. 316 AH), a short and comprehensive creed poem.

3. *Nuniyyat al-Qahtani*, whose author is unknown, though its general content agrees with the truth.
4. *Al-Ash'ariyyah* by Abu Tahir al-Rustumiyyari ibn Ahmad al-Asbahani (d. 469 AH).
5. *Al-Daliyyah* by Abu al-Khattab al-Kalwadhani (d. 510 AH).
6. *Dalal al-Mujassim wa-l-Mu'attil* by Abu Tahir al-Silafi (d. 576 AH).
7. *Da'uni 'an Asanid al-Dalal* by Abu Tahir al-Silafi, encouraging taking knowledge from Ahl al-Sunnah and avoiding narration from innovators; it names imams of Ahl al-Sunnah and criticises innovators.
8. *Al-Lamiyyah* by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH).
9. *Al-Kafiyyah al-Shafiyyah*, known as the *Nuniyyah*, by Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH), the broadest and most comprehensive of these poems.
10. *Sullam al-Wusul* by Hafiz al-Hakami (d. 1377 AH).
11. *Al-Jawharah al-Faridah* by Hafiz al-Hakami.
12. *Jawharat al-Tawhid* by Ibn Musharraf al-Ahsa'i (d. 1285 AH), along with other poems of his.
13. The poetry collection of Sulayman ibn Sahman al-Asiri (d. 1348 AH).

7. Books to Approach with Caution

These are well-known works in Salafi circles that many people think are fully sound in method, but they contain matters that require caution:

- ***Al-Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah* by Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi (d. 321 AH):** it is among the most widely circulated concise creeds today, but it follows the way of the Murji'ah in some passages.^[R28] Commentators often try to correct or explain those passages.
- ***I'tiqad A'immat al-Hadith* by Abu Bakr al-Isma'ili:** it contains phrases in the style of speculative theologians.

References

[R28] See my article "Criticisms of al-Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah."

- **I'tiqad al-Imam al-Munabbal Ahmad ibn Hanbal** by Abu al-Fadl al-Tamimi (d. 410 AH): it claims to present Imam Ahmad's creed, but al-Tamimi was Kullabi^[E27] and the work mixes Imam Ahmad's positions with those of the people of kalam.
- **A work attributed to al-Nawawi on the Salaf's belief about letters and sounds**: it is promoted as a Salafi creed written after al-Nawawi left Ash'arism, but its real author is unknown, and its creed follows the Salimiyyah. ^[E28]
- ***Al-Manzumah al-Safariniyyah* by Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Safarini (d. 1188 AH)**: Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh said that much of it represents the creed of the saved group, but that some Ash'ari beliefs entered it, as they entered other works. ^[R29]
- **The works of Abu Ya'la al-Hanbali**: Ibn Taymiyyah said that Abu Ya'la sometimes used tafwid, saying the texts are passed on according to their outward wording while their meanings are left to Allah^[R30]. Ibn Taymiyyah also said that some Hanbalis, including Abu al-Hasan al-Tamimi, Qadi Abu Bakr, and Qadi Abu Ya'la, adopted a view similar to Ibn Kullab on this foundation. ^[R31]

Fourth: Books of Fiqh

In technical usage, fiqh means practical rulings such as prayer, zakah, trade, marriage, and judicial rulings. Fiqh books can be divided into three broad kinds:

1. **School-based works**: tied to a specific madhhab, although opposing positions may be mentioned in order to answer them.
2. **Non-school works**: the writer performs his own ijtihad.

Explanations

^[E27] Kullabi: following the theological approach associated with Abd Allah ibn Sa'id ibn Kullab, an early current of kalam that preceded Ash'arism.

^[E28] Salimiyyah: a kalam school with Sufi tendencies associated with Ibn Salim al-Basri.

References

^[R29] Fatawa wa-Rasa'il Muhammad ibn Ibrahim, 1/201.

^[R30] Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa-l-Naql, 7/35.

^[R31] Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah, 1/424.

3. **Comparative fiqh works:** books gathering the different views of scholars, sometimes as a simple collection and sometimes with discussion and evidence.

Major Maliki Works

- *Al-Muwatta'* by Imam Malik: a hadith work that also records the practice of the people of Madinah.
- *Al-Mudawwanah*: gathers the positions of Imam Malik and his student Ibn al-Qasim.
- *Al-Risalah* by Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani: contains a short creed and a concise presentation of Maliki fiqh.

Major Shafi'i Works

- *Al-Risalah* by Imam al-Shafi'i, on the foundations of fiqh.
- *Al-Umm* by Imam al-Shafi'i, on fiqh.
- *Al-Mukhtasar* by al-Buwayti (d. 231 AH).
- *Al-Mukhtasar* by al-Muzani (d. 264 AH).

Major Hanbali Works

- The *Masa'il* collections, which gather Imam Ahmad's answers to questions from his students. Among those who compiled these reports were Abd Allah ibn Ahmad, Salih ibn Ahmad, Harb al-Kirmani, Ishaq al-Kawsaj, and Abu Dawud al-Sijistani.
- *Zad al-Musafir* by Ghulam al-Khallal, gathering important rulings from Imam Ahmad.
- *Mukhtasar al-Khiraqi*, which gathers Ahmad's fiqh in the form of a concise legal manual.

Fifth: Books of Character

These works aim to educate the Muslim and refine his character. They are divided into narrated works and prose works.

Narrated Works

These gather prophetic hadiths and may add statements and actions of the Salaf. Important examples listed are:

- *Al-Zuhd* by Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181 AH), on reminders of the Hereafter, character, repentance, and related subjects.
- *Al-Zuhd* by al-Mu'afa ibn Imran al-Mawsili (d. 185 AH). Many books titled *Zuhd* cover character broadly, while this one focuses more specifically on zuhd.
- *Al-Zuhd* by Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d. 197 AH).
- *Al-Zuhd* by Asad ibn Musa (d. 212 AH), focused on reminders of the Hereafter.
- *Al-Khutab wa-l-Mawa'iz* by Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d. 224 AH), containing admonitions from prophets and Companions.
- *Al-Zuhd* by Imam Ahmad (d. 241 AH), transmitting reports from prophets and Companions.
- *Al-Zuhd* by Hannad ibn al-Sari (d. 243 AH), a very large work including the Hereafter, zuhd, and manners.
- *Al-Adab al-Mufrad* by al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH).
- *Iqtida' al-'Ilm al-'Amal* by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463 AH), aimed especially at students of knowledge and the correction of intention and action.

Prose Works

These works consist mainly of the author's own words. Examples include:

- Imam Malik's letter on Sunnahs, admonitions, and manners to Harun al-Rashid.
- *Adab al-Nafs* by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. around 320 AH), on actions of the heart, certainty, and struggling against the self.
- *Al-Manhiyyat* by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, gathering things forbidden by the Messenger of Allah and explaining the wisdom of the prohibitions.
- *Akhlaq al-'Ulama'* by al-Ajurri (d. 360 AH), on the character of scholars and students of knowledge.
- *Al-Jami' fi al-Sunan wa-l-Adab wa-l-Maghazi wa-l-Tarikh* by Ibn Abi Zayd (d. 386 AH), a relatively short general work.

- *Manazil al-Sa'irin* by Abu Isma'il al-Harawi (d. 481 AH), on stages of turning to Allah. It contains difficult points that Ibn al-Qayyim addressed in his commentary *Madarij al-Salikin*.
- Works of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH), including works on patience, diseases of the heart, and purification of the soul.
- The many works of Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH).
- The many works of Ibn Rajab (d. 795 AH).

Sixth: Dictionaries and Language Works

- *Al-'Ayn* by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 170 AH), the earliest Arabic dictionary.
- *Al-Gharib al-Musannaf* by al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d. 224 AH), gathering names of things by topic.
- *Gharib al-Hadith* by al-Qasim ibn Sallam, explaining uncommon words in prophetic hadith.
- *Al-Jarathim* by Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH), gathering names of things by topic.
- *Gharib al-Hadith* by Ibn Qutaybah, explaining uncommon words in prophetic hadith.
- *Al-Taqfiyah fi al-Lughah* by al-Bandniji (d. 284 AH), a dictionary.
- *Gharib al-Hadith* by Ibrahim ibn Ishaq al-Harbi (d. 285 AH).
- *Tahdhib al-Lughah* by Abu Mansur al-Azhari (d. 370 AH), a dictionary.

How Does a Person Become One of Them?

Foundation

If we understand that a Sunni is someone who follows the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, according to the way of the best early generations, then this is in short what a person needs in order to be from Ahl al-Sunnah. ^[E29]

The principles of Ahl al-Sunnah are divided into foundations and branches. **Foundations** are broad rules and clear, well-known matters. **Branches** are applications of those foundations or individual questions.

A person who opposes one of the foundations is not considered Sunni. As for a branch issue, if the mistake is an individual error, it does not remove a person from the Sunnah. But if it becomes clear that his mistake in the branch is built upon opposition to a foundation, he is declared an innovator. ^[E30]

Evidence for This Principle

Imam Ahmad said: "Among the binding matters of the Sunnah are things that, if a person leaves one of them, does not say it, and does not believe it, he is not from its people." He then listed a number of matters, showing that a person who opposed them was not counted as Sunni. ^[R32]

Harb al-Kirmani said: "Whoever opposes anything from these positions, attacks them, or criticises the one who holds them is an opponent, an innovator, outside the Jama'ah, and removed from the path of the Sunnah and the way of truth." ^[R33]

But when Harb was told of a hadith scholar who said, "Whoever testifies that the ten are in Paradise is an innovator," he found the statement very serious and said: "Perhaps he is ignorant and does not know. It should be explained to him." ^[R34]

Explanations

^[E29] An ordinary Muslim who has not adopted a sectarian innovation is normally counted among Ahl al-Sunnah because the starting point is accepting the Qur'an and Sunnah and obeying the Prophet. If he adopts an innovation, he is then connected to that innovation.

^[E30] This distinction avoids two extremes: declaring every person who errs an innovator, and treating every innovator as Sunni. An individual error from ignorance, misunderstanding, or unavailable evidence differs from one arising from an innovated underlying principle.

References

^[R32] Al-Jami' li-'Ulum al-Imam Ahmad - al-'Aqidah, 3/24.

^[R33] Ijma' al-Salaf fi al-I'tiqad kama Hakahu Harb al-Kirmani, p. 34.

^[R34] Al-Sunnah by al-Khallal, 1/289, reports 504-506.

He therefore treated the bad statement as ignorance rather than as proof that the man had left the Sunnah, because the man accepted the foundation of not testifying Paradise for a specific person but was ignorant of the branch exception concerning the ten promised Paradise.

When Ibn al-Mubarak heard that a shaykh from Ahl al-Sunnah had said, "I withhold judgement concerning the Vision,"^[E31] he said: "The shaykh did not understand the meaning of the verse." He also said: "Do not spread this from him; it was a mistake from him," even though the Jahmiyyah used the statement as support.^[R35]

There is also some tolerance in practical questions where Sunni scholars have differed. Imam Ahmad, for example, did not hold that people should rise against the Jahmi rulers of his time despite regarding their doctrine as disbelief. When Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Marwazi rose against al-Wathiq, al-Marwadhi reported Imam Ahmad saying: "How generous he was - he gave his own life."^[R36]

The Foundations of the Sunnah

Scholars gathered the foundations of the Sunnah into lists of issues explaining the position of Ahl al-Sunnah and the positions that oppose it among the people of innovation. They also explained that a person who opposes them in these foundations is not from Ahl al-Sunnah. The following is a collection drawn from my book *Al-Durar al-Munaddadah min 'Aqa'id al-Salaf al-Musnadah*.^[E32]

Explanations

^[E31] Meaning the believers seeing Allah on the Day of Resurrection.

^[E32] The named imams in these lists are those whose statements appear in *al-Durar al-Munaddadah*; the lists are examples, not exhaustive lists of everyone who held each doctrine.

References

^[R35] Musnad Ishaq ibn Rahawayh, 3/674.

^[R36] Tarikh Baghdad, 5/177; Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad by Ibn al-Jawzi, p. 484; Bahr al-Dam.

First: General Method and the Foundations of Evidence

The cornerstone of the creed of the righteous Salaf is the method by which they received and understood the religion. It rests on two connected principles: following the revealed texts according to the understanding of the Companions, and rejecting newly invented religious ideas. This protected them from innovative groups that placed opinion and reason over revelation and preserved the simplicity and clarity of the creed as it came. The statements of the early imams repeatedly show strong respect for the Sunnah and warnings against speaking about religion through personal opinions and desires.

Holding to the Sunnah and Following the Righteous Salaf

The early imams stressed the duty of holding firmly to the prophetic Sunnah and the method of the Companions and Tabi'un, treating it as the source from which creed is received. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz described the early Muslims as people who stopped where they stopped because of knowledge and held back with clear insight. What later people invented came from following a path other than theirs and thinking themselves above them.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 101 AH) advised: "Hold firmly to the Sunnah, for by Allah's permission it is protection for you. Be pleased for yourself with what those people were pleased with for themselves. They stopped upon knowledge and held back with clear insight. If there had been any special virtue in going beyond them, the people before us would have had the strongest right to it, for they are the ones who came first."

Abu Amr Abd al-Rahman ibn Amr al-Awza'i (d. 157 AH) said: "Make yourself patient upon the Sunnah. Stop where the people stopped. Say what they said, hold back from what they held back from, and follow the path of your righteous Salaf. What was enough for them is enough for you."

Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH) defined the binding Sunnah by saying: "The binding Sunnah is that if a person leaves one of its qualities, does not say it, and does not believe it, he is not from its people... believing the hadiths and believing in them. It is not said: why or how. It is only to believe them and have faith in them."

Ishaq ibn Rahawayh (d. 238 AH) defined the Jama'ah as: "A scholar who holds firmly to the report of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and his way. Whoever is with him and follows him is the Jama'ah; whoever opposes him in that has left the Jama'ah."

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH) said: "The foundations of the Sunnah with us are holding firmly to what the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, were upon and taking them as examples." He added: "The Sunnah with us is the reports of the Messenger of Allah. The Sunnah explains the Qur'an and is evidence for the Qur'an. There is no analogy in the Sunnah. Nor are analogies drawn for it. It is not grasped by reason or desires. It is only following and leaving desire."

Warning against Innovation and Argument in Religion

The position of Ahl al-Sunnah toward innovations, innovators, and religious arguments was clear and firm among the Salaf. They warned against sitting with people of innovation and against making argument with them a path for oneself because it can open the door to doubt. Many statements warn against sitting with or listening to people of desires.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 101 AH) said: "Whoever makes his religion a target for arguments changes positions more often."

Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d. 197 AH) said: "Beware of these Murji'ah and these Jahmiyyah."

Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH) said: "A person does not argue with anyone, debate, or learn disputation. Speaking about divine decree and other matters of the Sunnah through dispute is disliked."

In Imam Ahmad's letter to al-Mutawakkil he quoted the prophetic report, "Arguing over the Qur'an is disbelief," and the report from Mu'awiyah ibn Qurrah: "Beware of these disputes, for they wipe out deeds." He also quoted Abu Qilabah: "Do not sit with the people of desires... I do not feel safe that they will plunge you into their misguidance."

The shaykhs of al-Khallal wrote in a letter warning against innovators: "Fear Allah, servants of Allah. Accept His instruction and hold back from speaking about this, for entering into it is innovation and misguidance." They strongly forbade arguing and disputes in religion.

Later imams who collected the beliefs of the Salaf followed the same approach. Abu al-Qasim Hibat Allah ibn al-Hasan al-Lalaka'i (d. 418 AH) indicated that safety lies in avoiding innovations and avoiding listening to the things introduced by those who misguide.

The Salaf's commitment to following revelation and rejecting religious innovation protected their beliefs from alteration and forced interpretation and left them with a clear faith in Allah, His names, and His attributes.

Second: Matters Concerning Allah and His Attributes

The chapter of Allah's names and attributes has a central place in the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah. It is not merely an isolated subject, but a practical application of submission to revelation in contrast to schools of *kalam* such as the Jahmiyyah and Ash'ariyyah, which make philosophical reasoning the judge over the text.

The method of the Salaf is to affirm what Allah affirmed for Himself in His Book and what the Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him, affirmed for Him in the Sunnah, in a way suitable to Allah's majesty and greatness: without changing the meanings, denying the realities, asking how they are, or making them like the attributes of creation. The Qur'anic foundation given is: "There is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing." This approach is found in statements of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, Ibn al-Majishun, and others.

The Qur'an Is the Speech of Allah and Is Not Created

The question of whether the Qur'an was created became a major historical trial and a dividing line between the method of the Salaf and that of speculative theologians. The early imams agreed that the Qur'an is truly the speech of Allah, an attribute of His, and not one of His created things. They regarded saying that it is created as disbelief.

Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah, not created. From Him it began and to Him it returns. Whoever says other than this is an unbeliever."

Malik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah... Whoever says the Qur'an is created is disciplined and imprisoned until his repentance becomes known."

Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d. 197 AH): "Whoever says the Qur'an is created has disbelieved in what was sent down to Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. He is asked to repent; if he repents, that is accepted, otherwise his neck is struck."

Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr al-Humaydi (d. 219 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah. I heard Sufyan say: The Qur'an is the speech of Allah, and whoever says it is created is an innovator."

Yusuf ibn Yahya al-Buwayti (d. 231 AH), while imprisoned in chains, said: "Allah created creation with 'Be.' If 'Be' were created, it would be as though a created thing created another created thing. By Allah, I will die in these chains of mine so that people after me will know that people died in chains over this matter."

Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah, not created. Do not be weak in saying: it is not created."

Ibrahim ibn Khalid Abu Thawr al-Kalbi (d. 240 AH): "Whoever says the speech of Allah is created is an unbeliever because of that statement; prayer is not performed behind him."

Isma'il ibn Yahya al-Muzani (d. 264 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah, Mighty and Majestic... and it is not created so that it might perish."

Abu Bakr Ibn Abi Asim (d. 287 AH): "The Qur'an is the speech of Allah, Blessed and Most High. Allah spoke it. It is not created. Whoever says it is created after the proof has been established against him is an unbeliever in Allah the Mighty."

Affirming Allah's Attributes

Among the foundations of Sunni Islam is affirming the divine attributes found in the Qur'an and Sunnah without interpreting them away or changing them from their apparent meaning in a way suitable to Allah.

Ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311 AH) said: "We and all our scholars from the people of the Hijaz, Tihamah, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt hold this position: we affirm for Allah what Allah affirmed for Himself. We acknowledge that with our tongues and believe it with our hearts, without likening the Face of our Creator to the face of any created being. Our Lord is far above resembling created beings, and far above the statements of those who deny His attributes. He is far above being nothing, as the people of falsehood say, because whatever has no attribute is nothing. Allah is far above what the Jahmiyyah say when they deny the attributes of our Creator by which He described Himself in His clear Revelation and upon the tongue of His Prophet."^[R37]

Al-Awza'i said: "We and the Tabi'un were numerous and we said: Allah, Most High, is above His Throne, and we believe in the attributes that came in the Sunnah."

Among the attributes explicitly affirmed in their transmitted creed statements are:

- **Rising over the Throne:** Malik ibn Anas stated that Allah is in heaven. Al-Humaydi said: "We say: The Most Merciful rose over the Throne; whoever claims otherwise is a denying Jahmi." Qutaybah ibn Sa'id said: "Allah is known to be in the seventh heaven above His Throne." Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari later said: "Allah, Glorified, is above His Throne, as He said: The Most Merciful rose over the Throne."

Ibn Abd al-Barr said: "The scholars among the Companions and Tabi'un from whom tafsir was transmitted agreed in explaining His saying, 'There is no private conversation of three except that He is the fourth of them,' that He is above the Throne and His knowledge is in every place. No one whose statement is considered proof disagreed with them about this."^[R38]

References

[R37] Kitab al-Tawhid, 1/26.

[R38] Al-Tamhid, 7/138.

- **The two Hands:** affirmed by al-Shafi'i through the verse "Rather, both His Hands are outspread," and by Ibn al-Majishun and al-Humaydi through verses including "the heavens will be folded in His Right Hand." Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari is also cited with the verse "what I created with My two Hands."
- **The Face:** affirmed by al-Shafi'i through "The Face of your Lord will remain, Owner of Majesty and Honour," and likewise by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari.
- **The two Eyes:** affirmed by Ibn al-Majishun through "that you may be brought up under My Eye," and by al-Shafi'i through the hadith of the Dajjal: "Your Lord is not one-eyed." Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari is cited with "sailing before Our Eyes."
- **The Foot:** affirmed by Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam, al-Shafi'i, and Ibn al-Majishun through the hadith: "until the Most Merciful places His Foot in it," meaning Hell.
- **Laughter:** affirmed by al-Qasim ibn Sallam, al-Shafi'i, and Ibn al-Majishun through hadiths such as the man who meets Allah while Allah laughs toward him and "Allah laughed at what you did with your guest last night."
- **Descent:** affirmed by al-Shafi'i through the hadith that Allah descends every night to the lowest heaven.
- **Fingers:** affirmed by Hammad ibn Zayd and al-Shafi'i through the hadith: "There is no heart except that it is between two Fingers of the Fingers of the Most Merciful."

The Believers Seeing Their Lord on the Day of Resurrection

Ahl al-Sunnah agreed that the believers will see their Lord in the Hereafter with their eyes and that this is the greatest delight of the people of Paradise. They use clear evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah for this.

Ibn al-Majishun explained that whoever denies the Vision is denying "the greatest honour with which Allah honours His allies on the Day of Resurrection." He cited the verse: "Faces that Day will be radiant, looking at their Lord," and the hadith: "You will see your Lord on that Day just as you see [the full moon]."

Al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH) affirmed that "the believers will see their Lord on the Day of Resurrection with their eyes just as they see the moon on the night it is full." Also named are al-Humaydi, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh, al-Muzani, and Ibn Abi Asim among those who explicitly included this belief in their creed statements.

Belief in Divine Decree, Its Good and Its Bad

Belief in divine decree is one of the pillars of faith. It means firm belief that everything that occurs in creation - good and bad, pleasant and bitter - occurs through Allah's decree, knowledge, and will, and that Allah is the Creator of the actions of His servants. This foundation was explicitly stated in the creeds of Sufyan al-Thawri, al-Humaydi, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Abu Thawr al-Kalbi, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Abi Asim, Abu Isma'il al-Harawi, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.

Third: The Reality and Parts of Faith

One major theological disagreement concerns the meaning of *iman*. This is one of the key issues distinguishing Ahl al-Sunnah from other groups. The Hanafi Murji'ah defined faith as belief in the heart and statement by the tongue without action, while the Jahmiyyah defined it as knowledge alone.

Ahl al-Sunnah agreed that faith is not merely an inward belief. Rather, it is made up of the action of the heart, the statement of the tongue, and the actions of the body.

Al-Fudayl ibn Iyad (d. 187 AH) gave a detailed explanation using verses such as: "They were only commanded to worship Allah, making the religion sincerely for Him, inclining to truth, to establish prayer and give zakah; that is the upright religion." He argued that Allah called prayer and zakah part of "the upright religion" and said:

"The people of irja' say: faith is speech without action. The Jahmiyyah say: faith is knowledge without speech or action. Ahl al-Sunnah say: faith is knowledge, speech, and action."

This definition was also held by Malik ibn Anas, Abu Thawr al-Kalbi, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Abi Asim, Sufyan al-Thawri, Ali ibn al-Madini, and Qutaybah ibn Sa'id. Some added "intention," and al-Humaydi added both "intention" and "Sunnah."

Faith Increases and Decreases

Because action is part of faith, faith itself increases and decreases. It increases through obedience and acts that bring a person close to Allah and decreases through sins and disobedience.

The Murji'ah claimed that faith neither increases nor decreases, which would make their faith equal to the faith of Jibril and Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181 AH) replied: "Yes, faith increases; yes, faith increases," repeating it three times. This principle is also attributed to Sufyan al-Thawri, Malik ibn Anas,^[E33] al-Humaydi, Ali ibn al-Madini, and Ibn Abi Asim.

The Major Sinner Is Not Declared an Unbeliever Merely for the Sin

Ahl al-Sunnah take a middle position regarding the Muslim who commits a major sin. They do not declare him an unbeliever as the Khawarij do, and they do not call his faith complete as the Murji'ah do. Rather, they say he is a believer with deficient faith, or a believer because of his faith and a sinner because of his major sin. If he dies upon that sin, his affair in the Hereafter is with Allah: if Allah wills He punishes him, and if He wills He forgives him.

Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181 AH), when asked about a person who commits adultery and drinks wine, said: "I do not remove him from faith."

Al-Humaydi (d. 219 AH) said: "We do not say as the Khawarij say: whoever commits a major sin has disbelieved. We do not declare a person an unbeliever for sins; disbelief is in leaving the five..."

Explanations

[E33] Some attribute to Malik the view that faith does not decrease. This report is not established from Malik; the established report affirms both increase and decrease.

Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH) said: "We do not testify that any person of the qiblah will enter Paradise or the Fire because of a deed he did. We hope for the righteous person and fear for the sinful wrongdoer, and we hope for Allah's mercy for him."

Qutaybah ibn Sa'id (d. 240 AH) said: "We do not declare anyone an unbeliever because of a sin except abandoning the prayer, even if he commits major sins."

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH) said: "Whoever meets Allah with a sin that deserves the Fire while having repented and not persisted in it, Allah accepts his repentance. Whoever persists without repentance, his affair is with Allah, Mighty and Majestic: if He wills, He punishes him, and if He wills, He forgives him."

A distinction must be made between a sinner and a person who declares the forbidden act lawful. A person who knowingly treats the clear prohibitions as lawful is an unbeliever by agreement,^[R39]

Fourth: The Companions and Leadership

The Companions hold a major place in the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah. Loving them, respecting them, and knowing their virtue and rank distinguish Ahl al-Sunnah from groups that attack the Companions, such as the Shi'ah and Ibadis. The same applies to the rightly guided caliphs and their order in virtue.

The Order of the Rightly Guided Caliphs

The early imams agreed on the following order in virtue and leadership: Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, then Umar ibn al-Khattab, then Uthman ibn Affan, then Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah be pleased with them all.

Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161 AH) included among the conditions of agreeing with the Sunnah: "Giving precedence to the two shaykhs, Abu Bakr and Umar, may Allah be pleased with them."

References

[R39] Al-Sarim al-Maslul, p. 521.

Ali ibn al-Madini (d. 234 AH): "The best of this nation after its Prophet is Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, then Umar, then Uthman ibn Affan. We put these three first just as the Companions of the Messenger of Allah did, and they did not disagree over that. Then after these three are the five members of the consultation: Ali, Talhah, al-Zubayr, Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, and Sa'd ibn Malik."

Qutaybah ibn Sa'id (d. 240 AH): "The best of this nation after its Prophet is Abu Bakr, then Umar, then Uthman."

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH): "The best of this nation after its Prophet is Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, then Umar ibn al-Khattab, then Uthman ibn Affan. We put these three first just as the Companions of the Messenger of Allah did; they did not disagree over that."

Al-Muzani (d. 264 AH) said that the virtue of Abu Bakr, the caliph of the Messenger of Allah, is affirmed, and described him as the best of creation after the Prophet. He then placed Umar after him and Uthman ibn Affan, the possessor of the two lights, third.

Ibn Abi Asim (d. 287 AH): "Abu Bakr al-Siddiq is the best of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah after him and is the caliph of prophetic succession. Then Umar ibn al-Khattab after him in the same way, then Uthman ibn Affan after him, then Ali after him."

Al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh: "Say with your tongue and know with certainty in your heart that the best of this nation after its Prophet is Abu Bakr, then Umar, then Uthman, then Ali. May Allah be pleased with them."

There is a historical disagreement over whether Ali should be placed clearly above the remaining Companions promised Paradise or whether he and the rest of them share one rank after Uthman. Imam Ahmad said: "We do not criticise the one who makes Ali fourth because of his kinship, his marriage connection, his early Islam, and his justice."^[R40]

References

[R40] Al-Sunnah by Abd Allah ibn Ahmad, 2/573.

Al-Khallal also reports that Ahmad did not reject the view of Asim and Abu Ubayd in making Ali fourth, and that he regarded the person who does so as a person of Sunnah.^[R41]

Loving the Companions and Not Entering into Their Disputes

Among the firm foundations of Ahl al-Sunnah is loving all the Companions of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, asking Allah to have mercy on them, recognising their virtue, and keeping away from arguing over the conflicts that took place between them. They are regarded as people of ijtihad who sought what was good.

Al-Humaydi (d. 219 AH) said: "Ask Allah to have mercy on all the Companions of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Allah, Mighty and Majestic, says: 'Those who came after them say: Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who came before us in faith.' Whoever insults any one of them, belittles him, or criticises him is not upon the Sunnah."

Qutaybah ibn Sa'id (d. 240 AH) said: "Keep away from speaking about the faults of the Companions of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. None of them is to be mentioned badly or belittled."

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH) said: "Whoever belittles any Companion of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, hates him because of something that occurred, or mentions his faults is an innovator until he asks Allah to have mercy on all of them and his heart is sound toward them."

Al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh said: "Keep away from speaking about what occurred between the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him."

References

[R41] Al-Sunnah by Abu Bakr al-Khallal, 2/409.

Fifth: Belief in Matters Known Only Through Revelation and Other Issues

Sam'iyat are unseen matters that can only be known through a truthful report from the Qur'an and authentic prophetic Sunnah. Believing them is part of submitting fully to revelation.

Belief in Matters of the Hereafter

The early creeds affirm the terrors and major events of the Day of Resurrection as they are described in revelation. These include:^[E34]

- **The Hawd:** affirmed by Sufyan ibn Uyaynah, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and Ibn Abi Asim.
- **The Scale:** affirmed by Sufyan ibn Uyaynah, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Abi Asim, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.
- **Intercession:** affirmed by Sufyan ibn Uyaynah, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and Ibn Abi Asim.
- **The Bridge:** affirmed by Sufyan ibn Uyaynah and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.
- **Major sinners leaving the Fire:** affirmed by Ali ibn al-Madini, Abu Thawr al-Kalbi, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Abi Asim, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.

The Mu'tazilah and Ibadis deny these matters.

Belief in the Barzakh and the Signs of the Hour

The Salaf also affirmed what the texts report about events after death and before the Day of Resurrection, as well as the major signs that come before the Hour.

- **The punishment and trial of the grave:** faith in it is a foundation of Ahl al-Sunnah. It was explicitly affirmed by Sufyan ibn Uyaynah, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Abi Asim, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.

Explanations

^[E34] The order of these events is not intended to be chronological; the purpose here is only to affirm them.

- **The questioning by Munkar and Nakir:** part of the trial of the grave. It is explicitly named by Ali ibn al-Madini, Ibn Abi Asim, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.
- **The coming of the Dajjal:** one of the major signs of the Hour, affirmed by Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.
- **The descent of Jesus, peace and blessings be upon him:** one of the major signs of the Hour, affirmed by Ali ibn al-Madini and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Fiqh Matters Included in Creed Books

Some practical fiqh questions were included in books of Sunnah because they became clear marks distinguishing Ahl al-Sunnah from groups such as the Khawarij, Rafidah, and Ahl al-Ra'y.

- **Hearing and obeying the rulers, praying behind them, and fighting alongside them:** this foundation was stated by Sufyan al-Thawri, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Muzani, and Ibn Abi Asim.
- **Not rebelling against a Muslim ruler:** they agreed that rebellion against a Muslim ruler is forbidden even if he is unjust. This is stated by Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and al-Muzani.
- **Wiping over leather socks:** treating this as part of the Sunnah became a sign of opposition to innovators such as the Rafidah. It was stated by Sufyan al-Thawri, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, and al-Abbas ibn Mishkawayh.
- **The ruling on abandoning prayer:** a number of imams stated that abandoning prayer is disbelief, among them al-Humaydi, Ali ibn al-Madini, Qutaybah ibn Sa'id, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Principles Agreed Upon by Ahl al-Sunnah

The following principles were agreed upon by the Salaf. I will mention them together with the scholars who reported the consensus, even when the scholar reporting it was not himself from Ahl al-Sunnah.

General Islamic Foundations

The Oneness of Allah

Allah's oneness is the foundation and heart of Islam, and all sound beliefs are built upon it. Whoever doubts that Allah alone is God is an unbeliever by consensus.^[R42]

Saying the Two Testimonies Is a Pillar

A person who is able to say the two testimonies but refuses to say them is an unbeliever by agreement of the Muslims.^[R43]

Taking the Disbelievers as Protecting Allies

Consensus is established that whoever takes the disbelievers as allies becomes an unbeliever like them. This is a truth over which no two Muslims disagree.^[R44]

Freedom from Major Shirk

Scholars past and present agreed that a person is not Muslim without leaving major shirk and being free of it and of its practice.^[R45]

Mocking the Religion Is Disbelief

The Muslims agreed that whoever insults Allah, insults His Messenger, rejects something Allah sent down, or kills one of Allah's prophets has disbelieved by that act even if he claims to accept everything else Allah revealed.^[R46]

Judging by the Qur'an and Sunnah

Whoever leaves the revealed law sent down to Muhammad, the final Prophet, and instead judges by an abrogated religious law or man-made laws while giving them priority over it has disbelieved by consensus.^[R47]

References

[R42] Maratib al-Ijma', p. 167.

[R43] Al-Iman al-Awsat, p. 154.

[R44] Al-Muhalla bi-l-Athar, 11/138.

[R45] Al-Durar al-Saniyyah fi al-Ajwibah al-Najdiyyah.

[R46] Al-Istidhkar, 2/150.

[R47] Al-Bidayah wa-l-Nihayah, 13/139.

Foundations Concerning Allah and His Attributes

Allah Alone Creates

The Muslims agreed that Allah alone, with no partner, is the Creator of everything besides Him. ^[R48]

Allah Is Just

The Salaf agreed that Allah is just in all His actions and rulings. ^[R49]

Allah Needs Nothing

The Salaf agreed that Allah is not in need of anything He created. ^[R50]

Allah Spoke to Moses

Whoever says that Allah did not speak to Moses is an unbeliever. ^[R51]

Hearing, Sight, and the Two Hands

The Salaf agreed that Allah hears and sees and that He has two outspread Hands. They are not bodily limbs, nor are they His blessing. ^[R52]

Foundations Concerning Revelation

The Qur'an Is Complete and Reliably Transmitted

There is no disagreement over the disbelief of a person who claims that verses were removed from the Qur'an and hidden, or who denies a verse, word, or letter whose place in the Qur'an is agreed upon. ^[R53]

References

[R48] Maratib al-Ijma', p. 167.

[R49] Risalah ila Ahl al-Thaghr, p. 166.

[R50] Risalah ila Ahl al-Thaghr, p. 166.

[R51] Al-Bayan wa-l-Tahsil, 16/399.

[R52] Risalah ila Ahl al-Thaghr, p. 166.

[R53] Sharh al-Sunnah by al-Barbahari, p. 132; Tahrir al-Nazar fi Kutub al-Kalam, p. 66.

Changing, Removing from, or Adding to the Qur'an

The Muslims agreed that whoever knowingly and deliberately changes a letter of the Qur'an, removes part of it, or adds to it something that is not from it is an unbeliever.^[R54]

The Qur'an Is Arabic and Is Allah's Speech

Whoever denies that the Arabic Qur'an is the speech of Allah is an unbeliever by consensus of the jurists.^[R55]

Foundations Concerning the Prophets

All Prophets Are Truthful

The Muslims agreed that the prophets are truthful and that it is disbelief to claim that they may lie in the message they brought.^[R56]

They also agreed that whoever denies the prophethood of a person whose prophethood is known is an unbeliever and apostate.^[R57]

The Prophets Are Protected from Major Sins and Sexual Immorality

The prophets are protected by the Shari'ah from major sins and shameful sexual acts, by consensus.^[R58]

The Honour of the Prophets

The Muslims agreed that whoever insults a prophet has disbelieved.^[R59]

Foundations Concerning the Messenger Muhammad, Peace and Blessings Be upon Him

References

[R54] Ihkam al-Ahkam, 3/141; Al-Shifa', 2/304; Al-Dhakhirah, 2/180.

[R55] The letter to the people of Zabid, p. 155.

[R56] Al-Shifa', 2/284.

[R57] Al-Jawab al-Sahih li-Man Baddala Din al-Masih, 2/344.

[R58] Al-Musawwadah fi Usul al-Fiqh, p. 77.

[R59] Al-Mustadrak 'ala Majmu' al-Fatawa, 1/119.

Believing Everything He Brought

The Salaf agreed that everything the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, brought in the Book of Allah and everything authentically established in his Sunnah must be believed.^[R60]

Submitting to Authentic Hadith

Consensus is established that whoever rejects something known by consensus to have been brought by the Messenger of Allah has disbelieved.^[R61]

Rejecting the Sunnah or the Duty to Obey the Messenger

The Muslims agreed that Allah sent Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, to all human beings and jinn.^[R62]

Whoever says, "We take only what is in the Qur'an," while rejecting the authority of the Sunnah is an unbeliever by consensus.^[R63]

The Finality of Prophethood

The Muslim community agreed that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is the final Prophet and that there is no prophet after him. Whoever claims prophethood after him is an unbeliever, and whoever believes such a claimant is likewise an unbeliever.^[R64]

The Jews and Christians after the Mission of Muhammad

The Qur'an, Sunnah, and consensus establish that a Jew or Christian who receives the message of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and does not believe in him is an unbeliever.^[R65]

References

[R60] Risalah ila Ahl al-Thaghr, p. 166.

[R61] Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa-l-Ahwa' wa-l-Nihal, 3/142.

[R62] Lawami' al-Anwar al-Bahiyyah, 2/279.

[R63] Al-Ihkam fi Usul al-Ahkam.

[R64] Maratib al-Ijma', p. 173; Al-I'tiqad al-Khalis min al-Shakk wa-l-Intiqad, p. 226.

[R65] Majmu' al-Fatawa, 12/496.

Not Declaring Non-Muslim Religions False

The Muslims agreed that whoever refuses to regard a religion other than Islam as false, doubts the disbelief of those who follow it, or declares their religion correct has himself disbelieved, even if he outwardly claims Islam.^[R66]

Believing in the Praised Station

The Praised Station is two things. The first is the Prophet's intercession for the judgement to begin on the Day of Resurrection. The second is the report that Allah will seat him with Him upon the Throne.

Abu Bakr al-Khallal transmitted from Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Naysaburi, a companion of Ishaq ibn Rahawayh, from Ishaq, from Muhammad ibn Fudayl, from Layth, from Mujahid concerning the verse, "Perhaps your Lord will raise you to a praised station." Mujahid said: "He will seat him with Him upon the Throne." Ishaq ibn Rahawayh said to Abu Ali al-Qawhistani: "Whoever rejects this report is a Jahmi."^[R67]

Abu Dawud al-Sijistani (d. 275 AH), the author of the Sunan, said: "I believe every person who rejects the report of Layth from Mujahid, 'He will seat him upon the Throne,' should be avoided and people should be warned against him until he returns to the truth. I did not think anyone known for the Sunnah would speak against this report. We only knew the Jahmiyyah to reject it because it affirms the Throne."^[R68]

References

[R66] Al-Tanbih wa-l-Radd 'ala Ahl al-Ahwa' wa-l-Bida', p. 40; Al-Shifa' bi-Ta'rif Huquq al-Mustafa, 2/610; Rawdat al-Talibin, 10/70.

[R67] Al-Sunnah by al-Khallal, 1/200, report 287.

[R68] Al-Sunnah by Abu Bakr al-Khallal, 1/233.

Al-Ajurri (d. 360 AH) said of Mujahid's report about the virtue of the Prophet and the explanation of the verse as meaning that Allah seats him upon the Throne: "The shaykhs among the people of knowledge and transmission of the hadith of the Messenger of Allah received it in the best manner, accepted it well, and did not reject it. They strongly criticised the one who rejected Mujahid's report and said: 'Whoever rejects Mujahid's report is an evil man.' Our position, praise belongs to Allah, is to accept what we have set out in this matter, to accept Mujahid's report, and to leave arguing and debating over its rejection."^[R69]

Foundations Concerning the Companions

Accusing Our Mother A'ishah of Immorality Is Disbelief

Whoever accuses A'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, of the accusation from which Allah declared her innocent in the Qur'an is an unbeliever by consensus because he rejects the clear Qur'anic text declaring her innocence.^[R70]

General Foundations and Rules

Condemning Speculative Theology

The jurists of the Salaf and Ahl al-Athar agreed in condemning *kalam* and its practitioners and regarded them as people of innovation and deviation. *Kalam* means arguing about creed through philosophy and human reasoning. Its practitioners call it a science through which tawhid is known and the essence and attributes of Allah are studied.^[R71]

Judging Certain Sects outside Islam

The Muslims agreed that some groups that claim Islam but go to extremes and leave its clear foundations are outside Islam, such as the Druze, Nusayris, and Batiniyyah. Whoever doubts their disbelief is likewise an unbeliever.^[R72]

References

[R69] Al-Shari'ah by al-Ajurri, 4/1612.

[R70] Al-Manthur fi al-Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah, 3/85.

[R71] Jami' Bayan al-'Ilm wa-Fadlih, 2/941.

[R72] Majmu' al-Fatawa, 35/162.

Congratulating People on Religious Rites of Disbelief

Congratulating people for religious rites that are specific to disbelief, such as their religious festivals, is forbidden by agreement. ^[R73]

Conclusion

This book is a short introduction to Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah. Whoever wants more detail should return to the sources mentioned throughout the book and to the works with which they enriched the Islamic library.

We have seen that Sunni Islam is not a newly invented school. It is the natural continuation of the Prophet's way and the method of the righteous Salaf from the Companions and Tabi'un. Its foundations are holding firmly to the Qur'an and Sunnah according to the understanding of the best generations, keeping away from innovations and blameworthy religious argument, submitting to what is authentically reported from our Lord and our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and loving all the Companions.

We ask Allah to make us and you among the sincere people of the Sunnah who follow without innovating, to unite the hearts of the Muslims upon truth and guidance. Praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all creation. May Allah send peace and blessings upon our Prophet Muhammad, his family, and all his Companions.

Muhammad ibn Shams al-Din

15 Jumada al-Ula 1447 AH | 6 November 2025

References

[R73] Ahkam Ahl al-Dhimma, 1/441.

Contents

Introduction	3
What Does Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah Mean?	3
The General Use: Anyone Who Is Not Shi'i	3
The Specific Use: Those Who Follow the Prophet's Way	4
The Difference Between the Two Meanings	4
Names Used for Them	5
Groups Attributed to the Sunnah	6
What Are Their Religious Sources?	13
First: Revelation	13
The Difference Between Mutawatir and Ahad	15
Second: Consensus	15
Third: Analogy	16
Fourth: Reports from the Early Muslims	16
Fifth: The Words of Scholars	17
Who Are Their Scholars?	17
Scholars According to Time	18
Those Who Came After Them	20
Some Well-Known Ash'ari Scholars	21
What Are Their Schools of Fiqh?	23
The School of Ahl al-Ra'y	23
The Schools of Ahl al-Hadith	24
The Maliki School	24
The Shafi'i School	24
The Hanbali School	25
What Are Their Books?	25
First: Tafsir	25
Second: Books of Hadith and Athar	27
The Most Important Hadith Collections	28
Third: Books of Creed	30
1. Concise Creeds	30
2. Books Based Mainly on Transmission	31
3. Books Mainly in the Author's Own Words	31
4. Books Combining Transmission and Explanation	32
5. Commentaries	32
6. Poems on Creed	32
7. Books to Approach with Caution	33
Fourth: Books of Fiqh	34
Major Maliki Works	35
Major Shafi'i Works	35
Major Hanbali Works	35

Fifth: Books of Character	35
Narrated Works	35
Prose Works	36
Sixth: Dictionaries and Language Works	37
How Does a Person Become One of Them?	37
Foundation	38
Evidence for This Principle	38
The Foundations of the Sunnah	39
First: General Method and the Foundations of Evidence	40
Holding to the Sunnah and Following the Righteous Salaf	40
Warning against Innovation and Argument in Religion	41
Second: Matters Concerning Allah and His Attributes	42
The Qur'an Is the Speech of Allah and Is Not Created	42
Affirming Allah's Attributes	44
The Believers Seeing Their Lord on the Day of Resurrection	45
Belief in Divine Decree, Its Good and Its Bad	46
Third: The Reality and Parts of Faith	46
Faith Increases and Decreases	47
The Major Sinner Is Not Declared an Unbeliever Merely for the Sin	47
Fourth: The Companions and Leadership	48
The Order of the Rightly Guided Caliphs	48
Loving the Companions and Not Entering into Their Disputes	50
Fifth: Belief in Matters Known Only Through Revelation and Other Issues	51
Belief in Matters of the Hereafter	51
Belief in the Barzakh and the Signs of the Hour	51
Fiqh Matters Included in Creed Books	52
Principles Agreed Upon by Ahl al-Sunnah	52
General Islamic Foundations	52
Foundations Concerning Allah and His Attributes	54
Foundations Concerning Revelation	54
Foundations Concerning the Prophets	55
Foundations Concerning the Messenger Muhammad, Peace and Blessings Be upon Him	55
Foundations Concerning the Companions	58
General Foundations and Rules	58
Conclusion	59