

The Meaning of "Sunna" in the Qur'an

Louay Fatoohi, PhD
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The term "sunna" occurs fourteen times in nine Qur'anic verses. It is used in four verses in the expression " *sunnat al-awwalin*" or the "sunna of the ancients." The term "sunna" is usually interpreted as meaning "example" or "fate," but it is a more general concept that means "way," "practice," "course," "tradition," "habit," "state," or "situation." So " *sunnat al-awwal*

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n
" should mean "
the way or practice of the ancients
." These are three of those four verses:

Say [O Muhammad!] to the disbelievers that if they desist then they will be forgiven what has past; but if they return, then the way of the ancients (*sunnat al-awwalin*) has passed away. (8.38)

They (the disbelievers) will not believe in it (the Qur'an), and the way of the ancients (*sunnat al-awwal* *i*
n
) has passed away. (15.13)

Nothing prevented people from believing when the guidance came to them and from asking pardon of their Lord other than [arguing for] the way of the ancients (*sunnat al-awwalin*) to come upon them or for the torment to come upon them before their eyes. (18.55)

The term "sunna" appears eight times in five verses in the expression "
sunnat Allah
" or the "
way of Allah
." One of these verses has both expressions "
sunnat al-awwal

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n
" and "
sunnat Allah
":

Do they (the disbelievers) wait for other than the way of the ancients (*sunnat al-awwalin*), but you will not find any alteration in the way of Allah (
sunnat Allah
) and you will not find any change in the way of Allah (
sunnat Allah
). (from 35.43)

Some exegetes understand the reference to "
sunnat al-awwal

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" as referring to God's punishment of those who rejected the messengers that He sent to them. In this case, this expression could be translated as the " fate of the ancients ."

These are the other four verses in which "sunnat Allah" appears:
There is no fault in the Prophet in seeking what Allah has ordained for him — the way of Allah (sunnat Allah) with those who passed away before. The commandment of Allah is a determinate decree. (33.38)

This is] the way of Allah (*sunnat Allah*) with those who passed away before, and you will not find any alteration in the way of Allah (*sunnat Allah*). (33.62)

Their faith did not help them when they faced our might; [this is] the way of Allah (*sunnat Allah*) which applied in the past to His servants, and there the disbelievers lost. (40.85)

This is] the way of Allah (*sunnat Allah*) which applied in the past, and you will not find any alteration in the way of Allah (*sunnat Allah*). (48.23)
Finally, this verse uses the term "sunna" twice, first in reference to the way of the messengers that God sent before Muhammad and then in the expression " sunnatun

a
(Our way)
, " meaning God's way:
[This is] the way (*sunna*) of those whom we sent [as messengers] before you, and you will not find any change in Our way (*sunnatuna*). (17.77) To recap, in the nine verses in which the term "sunna" appears, it is used nine times to refer to the sunna of Allah, four times for the sunna of the people of old, and once for the sunna of the previous messengers of Allah.

So the Qur'an does not use the term "sunna" in the sense of the way/practice of Prophet Muhammad. The closest that the Qur'an comes to this use is in verse 17.73 which talks about the sunna of the messengers before Muhammad. Naturally, the reference here is to one sunna or way, as the essence of religion never changed, as so it must apply to Prophet Muhammad

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also. But this reference must refer to the one set of general practices and values that all Messengers followed, as commanded by God, rather than actions that are specific to any one of them. So the distinct meaning of the term "sunna" as the actions and deeds of Prophet Muhammad specifically is not found in the Qur'an. This observation, however, does not change the fact that the Qur'an commands the Muslim to follow and emulate the Prophet: You have had a good example in the Messenger of Allah for the person who hopes for Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah much. (33.21) This command, of course, endorses the general behavior of the Prophet, both word and action, which is effectively what his Sunna means.

There are twelve verses that instruct the Muslims to "obey" the Prophet. To stress that obeying the Prophet is essential for obeying God, eleven of the twelve verses order the Muslims to "obey Allah and the Messenger" (3.32, 3.132), "obey Allah and obey the Messenger" (4.59, 4.92, 24.54, 47.33, 64.12), and "obey Allah and His Messenger" (8.1, 8.20, 8.46, 58.13). The twelfth verse tells the Muslim: "Obey the Messenger that you may be shown mercy" (24.56).

There are many more verses that command the Muslims to follow the Prophet. These verses confirm that the Prophet set by his words and deeds the best example for the Muslims, as God instructed him to do. This is why learning and understanding the behaviour of the Prophet is necessary for the Muslim. But we should always be aware of the fact the Sunna of the Prophet has never been as accessible after the Prophet as the Qur'an. Allah promised in the Qur'an that He will protect the Qur'an from being lost or changed, but He did not make such a promise about the Sunna of the Prophet. A number of factors affected what was written about and attributed to the Prophet over the decades and centuries after him. Indeed, various supposed details of the Sunna have been the subject of considerable disagreement among Muslim scholars from the early times after the Prophet. This fact should not stop us from being interested in learning the Sunna of the Prophet, but it should make us aware that this process is difficult and fraught with uncertainty. The suggestion that there is any source other than the Qur'an that we can fully trust about the history of the Prophet is in contradiction with history. To seriously study and examine the available sources of the Sunna of the Messenger of Allah is one way in which the Muslim discharges his/her duty to follow the Prophet.

The Qur'anic Verses that Contain the Term "Sunna"

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وَمَا يَكْفُرُ لَكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ مُبِينًا ۖ فَذَرُوا مَا تَدْعُونَ ۗ إِنَّ دَعْوَةَ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ حَسَنَةٌ ۚ فَاذْعَبُوا مَا تَتَّبِعُونَ ۗ ۝۸۳

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وَمَا يَكْفُرُ لَكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ مُبِينًا ۖ فَذَرُوا مَا تَدْعُونَ ۗ إِنَّ دَعْوَةَ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ حَسَنَةٌ ۚ فَاذْعَبُوا مَا تَتَّبِعُونَ ۗ ۝۱۵۱۳

15.13

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18.55

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35.43

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33.38

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33.62

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48.23

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17.77

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