

Preservation of Sunnah (part 4 of 4)

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

Third stage in collection of Hadeeth

With the passing away of the generation that had seen and heard the Prophet directly, the work of the collection of Hadeeth entered a third stage. Since the Companions had travelled far in the Islaamic world and entrusted the knowledge of Sunnah to their students before their death there were no more reports to be searched for from different persons, and the whole of the Hadeeth accumulation was now the property of the different teachers who taught at different centres. But in the second stage, Hadeeth had passed from individual possession into public possession, and therefore the whole body of accumulated Hadeeth could be learned in the third stage by repairing to different centres instead of searching it from different individuals.

Umar ibn Abdulazeez, the Umayyad Caliph, who ruled towards the close of the first century of Hijrah, was the first man who issued definite orders to the effect that written collections of Hadeeth should be made. Umar ibn Abdulazeez wrote to Aboo Bakr ibn Hazm:

“See whatever saying of the Prophet can be found, and write it down, for I fear the loss of knowledge and the disappearance of the learned men; and do not accept anything but the Hadeeth of the Prophet; and people should make knowledge public and should sit in companies so that he who does not know should come to know, for knowledge does not disappear until it is concealed from the public.”¹

Aboo Bakr ibn Hazm was the Caliph’s governor at Madeenah, and there is evidence that similar letters were written to other centres. Before the middle of the second century, written collections of Hadeeth saw the light of the day. Hundreds of students of Hadeeth were engaged in the work of learning it in different centres. Every scholar of Hadeeth travelled in search of hadeeth. Khateeb al-Baghdadee, a famous classical scholar, has written an entire work, Ar-Rihlah fi Talab al-Hadeeth, or Travelling in Search of Hadeeth. What is interesting is that the work talks about scholars who travelled in search of just one Hadeeth! By far the most important collection of the era is the Muwatta of Imaam Maalik which has recently been translated into English.

¹ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

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Fourth stage in collection of Hadeeth

The work of the collection of Hadeeth was brought to completion in the third century of Hijrah. Carefully compiled books of Hadeeth from this era have reached us in their complete form. It was then that three kinds of collections of Hadeeth were made: Musnad, Jami', and Sunan. The Musnad was the earlier type and the Jami' the later. The collections of Hadeeth known as Musnads were arranged, not according to the subject matter of the hadeeth, but under the name of the companion on whose final authority the hadeeth rested. The most important of the works of this class is the Musnad of Imaam Ahmad Hanbal which contains about thirty thousand narrations. Imaam Ahmad was born in 164 A.H. and died in 241 A.H. and is one of the greatest scholars in the history of Islaam. His collection, however, contains reports of all sorts. The Jami' not only arranges reports according to the subject matter, but is also more critical.

Six books are recognised generally under this heading, being the collections made by

- Muhammad ibn Ismaa'eel, commonly known as Al-Bukhaaree (d. 256 A.H.)
- Muslim (d. 261 A.H.)
- Aboo Daawood (d. 275 A.H.)
- Al-Tirmidhee (d. 279 A.H.)
- Ibn Maajah (d. 283 A.H.)
- Al-Nasaa'ee (d. 303 A. H.)

These books classified reports according to subject matter, making Hadeeth easy for reference for the scholars of Islaam. All these books have reached us as written by their original authors. Some of the major works have been translated into English.

Methods of preserving Hadeeth

Throughout the stages of Hadeeth collection, eight methods were utilised in preserving Hadeeth. Only the first and second will be discussed briefly below:

(1) Sama': that is reading by the teacher to the students.

(2) 'Ard: reading by the students to the teachers.

(3) Ijazah: to permit someone to transmit the hadeeth or book on the authority of the scholar without reading by any one.

(4) Munawalah: to hand someone the written material to transmit.

(5) Kitabah: to write hadeeth for someone.

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(6) I'lam: to inform someone that informer has permission to transmit certain material.

(7) Wasiyah: to entrust someone his books.

(8) Wajadah: to find some books or hadeeth written by someone just as the Christian discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the find of the oldest manuscript of the New Testament with some monks in Mount Sinai by Tischendorf. At no stage did Muslim scholars recognise this to be a reliable method of transmission.

In the period of the Companions only the first method was used. The students used to stay with their teachers, serve them, and learn from them. A little later, the most common methods were the first and second. Since wajadah was not recognised by the scholars, any method other than the seven listed above was not accepted.

Sama included oral recitation, reading from books, questions and answers, and dictation. The practice of oral recitation of Hadeeth by the teacher began to decline from the second half of the second century, although it persisted for a long time. The students were attached to one scholar for a long period of time, until they were considered authorities on the hadeeth of their teacher. Only a few hadeeth, about four or five were discussed in one lesson. Reading by the teacher from his own books was preferred. Reading by the teacher from the students' book was also done. This was a way to test the teacher to see if he had memorised his hadeeth properly. They would insert hadeeth into the hadeeth they had learned from their teacher, and hand the book to the teacher to read, to find out if he had a grip on his stuff. Those who failed to recognise the additional material were denounced and deemed untrustworthy.

'Ard was the most common practice from the beginning of the second century. Either copies were provided by the teachers, or made by the students from the original. They made a circular mark after every hadeeth. Whenever the student read the hadeeth to his teacher, he would make a mark in the circle to indicate that the hadeeth had been read to the teacher. This was necessary because even though the student knew the hadeeth through books, he was not allowed to use it in teaching it to others or for his own compilation until he had obtained it through proper means. Otherwise, he would be called hadeeth thief, sariq al-hadeeth.

A regular record was kept and after the complete book was read, a note was written by the teacher or one of the famous scholars attending the classes. These gave details of attendance, like who listened to the complete book, who joined partly, what part they read, and what part they missed, giving dates and places. The book was usually signed by the teacher or a famous attending scholar, to indicate that no further additions can be made to the book.

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Conclusion

As a result of tremendous and meticulous efforts of early Muslims the Sunnah and Hadeeth of the Prophet has been preserved accurately and reliably for us. Since Prophet Muhammad is the last prophet sent by Allaah to humanity, it only makes sense that his teachings be preserved completely. If his teachings were not preserved, another prophet would be necessary to find out what Allaah's religion is and how Allaah has to be obeyed. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad will be preserved till the Day of Judgment and therefore no more prophets will appear. It is upon us to learn and practice Islaam as Prophet Muhammad taught correctly and fully to earn salvation.