

AHL AL-SUNNAH WA AL-JAMĀ'AH A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Understanding about the meaning of “Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah” in the hadith which reads: "sa-Taftariqu 'Ummatī' alā Tsalātsatin wa Sab'īna Firqatin al-Nājiyatun Minhā Wāhidatan wa al-Bāqūna halkā," Qāla wa Man al-Nājiyah? Qāla: "Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah," Qīla wa Mā al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah ,? Qāla: "Mā Anā 'Alayhi wa Ashhābī" caused a polemic among Muslim scholars, not only among hadith scholars, but also among the kalām scholars. Using semantic analysis, this study found that the expression “ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā’ah” no longer refers to one of the groups of the kalām sect, it refers to those who follow the institutions of the prophet Muḥammad (may peace be upon him) and his shaḥābah. The breakers and heretics, they are no longer considered ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā’ah and gain salvation.

Keywords: al-Sunnah; al-Jamā'ah; semantics; hadith expert; kalām expert

A. INTRODUCTION

It is foretold that the Muslim community will be torn asunder into 73 factions, only one of which, the *al-Jamā'ah*, or *al-Ṣawādd al-A'zam*, or *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, will eventually attain salvation, the 72 other factions ending up in the Hell. This prophetic tradition (*ḥadīts*), which is hereinafter referred to as *sa-taftariqu* tradition, is subsequently proclaimed loudly as reliable and thereby its authenticity permits no doubt, since it is hardly escaped from the notice of the majority of *ḥadīts* transmitters, and further procured in their survived works. This affirmation, that only *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (lit. The people of the *sunnah* and of the community) will eventually attain salvation, in that *sa-taftariqu* tradition, has long been a matter of debate, formulated in the question of whether it is addressed to an inevitably established school to which the name *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is set, i.e., Sunnites, or to the adherents of *sunnah* (*ahl al-sunnah*, or *ṣāḥib al-sunnah*, or *ṣāḥib al-ḥadīts*, or simply *muḥaddith* which are mutually interchangeable). If it is referred to the former, then the Shī'ites, if not all factions, would say that the salvation is also meant for them. If, however, the Prophet's (may Allah bless and give him peace!) wording is directed toward the *ṣāḥib al-sunnah* in its strict sense, one should demonstrate the falsity of

the *fuqahā'*, *nuqqat*, *mufassirūn*, *ṣūfiyyūn* (lit. Jurists, grammarians, interpreters, sufists respectively) etc.

The only way of getting rid of such a dilemma, without questioning the authenticity of the *ḥadīths* as one may suppose, is to give a fresh and broader meaning of the *ṣāhib al-sunnah* or *ahl al-sunnah*. In this regard, the question, as to whose faction is really meant by this Prophet's affirmation, is not so much related. Rather, wisely, what are the criteria that make a faction or one eligible or accounted for *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*? –a question which will be taken seriously in the present analysis. In doing so, our study will be divided into mainly four parts. While part 1 serves as an introduction, part II is an elaboration of the meaning of the term *ahl al-sunnah* and *ahl al-Jamā'ah*. I shall set forth some criteria that would make one entitled to being a member of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. I shall conclude the discussion with some remarks.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

In the pre-Islamic (*Jāhiliyyah*) era, the concept *sunnah* had a broader sense. It stood for a way or manner of acting, whether good or bad, hence the (dis)approved custom or norm of previous generation (*al-awwalūn*). Subsequently, some time after the preaching of Islam had begun, the term *sunnah* came to assume its own new character. It stood for the generally approved standard or practice introduced by the prophet (may Allah bless and give him peace!) as generally understood as *sunnah al-nabī* as well as the *imām* or companions of right guidance. Indeed, it is not without good reason why the majority of *muḥaddithūn* bear the definition of *sunnah* as comprising Muḥammad's (may Allah bless and give him peace!) deeds, utterances and his unspoken approval (*fi'l, qaul, taqrīr*).

As to *sunnah* of which companion the community should refer in search for a model after the Prophet (may Allah bless and give him peace!) is a question which calls for a more elaborate analysis. But before that, it may be interesting in the present context to study how the Prophet's *sunnah* gradually became establish as the second foundation of Islam after the Holy Qur'ān.

Basing themselves on the verse that comes to mind most readily as offering a good opportunity for tracing the concept *sunnah* of the blessed Prophet in the Qur'ān, namely (*Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*, 33:21), "*la qad kāna lakum fī rasūl Allāh uswatun ḥasanah, etc.*" "You had in the Messenger of Allāh a perfect example, etc." and by virtue of a frequent Qur'ānic injunction "*aṭī'u Allāh wa aṭī'u al-rasūl.*" "Obey Allāh and His messenger!" (*Sūrat al-Nisā'*, 4:59) early Muslim scholars (may peace be upon them), such as chiefly Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767), Sufyān al-Tsaurī (d. 772), al-Awzā'ī (d. 774), Mālik b. Anas (d. 795), Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī (d. 820) and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), tried to develop and elaborate it in their search to recapture as complete as picture of the Prophet's ((may Allah bless and give him peace!) exemplary life.

It was the last two prominent scholars mentioned, towards the end of the 2nd / 8th century, who began to throw new light on the position of the *sunnah* of the Prophet (may Allah bless and give him peace!). Al-Syafi'i, for example, came to consider it the second most important root of Islamic jurisprudence after the Qur'an. He insisted that the term *hikmah* (lit. wisdom) in verses such as: ... *wa yu'allimuhum al-Kitab wa al-hikmah wa yuzakkīhim* (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2: 129) means *sunnat al-nabī*. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, on the other hand, according to this biographers, devoted himself from an early age to the study of *hadits-sunnah*, that he not only memorized a million of *hadīts* (pl. *Aḥādīts*) along with their *sanad* (pl. *asnad*), but strove to make his life conform in every detail to their prescriptions. "I have never written down a *ḥadīts* without putting in into practice," said Ibn Ḥanbal. It was probably not far wrong if one accredited both al-Syafi'i and Ibn Ḥanbal as *nāṣir al-sunnah* i.e. the savior of the *sunnah*. In this way one could go on. Of course, there are many other outstanding figures, other than those named. But the foregoing may be deemed sufficient to permit the tentative conclusion that by their time of al-Syafi'i onward, or even earlier, the *sunnat al-nabī* subsequently became more authoritative. As such is attested by the fact that it has significance not only in legal and theological writings but also in the philosophical and spiritual sense (*sūfism*). This phenomenon certainly deserves to be examined in depth, but it is something for which this is not the proper occasion.

Of course we do not here mean to imply that the *sunnat al-nabī* was rapidly overshadowed only after the injunction of al-Syafi'i and this devoted followers –thanks to the theorizing of al-Syafi'i and his fellow colleagues through which the Prophet's (may Allah bless and give him peace) *sunnah* was awarded the position of the second root of Islamic law, the *syarī'ah*, after the Qur'an. Such a Prophetic example, *sunnat al-nabī*, as generally agreed upon by Muslim scholars, is having been accepted already during the blessed Muḥammad's lifetime by the Muslim community. However, we may now turn our attention to the concepts *sunnah* of the *al-rāsyidūn al-mahdiyyūn*

After the death of the Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him peace!), the concept *sunnah* of the *al-rāshidūn al-mahdiyyūn* occasionally emerged in the earlier historical sources. Having explained the fallacious *bid'ah* (lit. starting new, innovation) the blessed Prophet thus continuous: "...*fa'-alaikum bi sunnatī wa-sunnat al-khulafā' al-rāshidīn al-mahdiyyīn*...." i.e. "....and hold fast to my *sunnah* and that of the companions of right guidance!"

Interestingly, the wording "*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn al-mahdiyyūn*" has always been the subject of discussion by two major schools of thought, i.e., the Syī'ite and the Sunnite. Briefly, from the Syī'ite's point of view, the *sunnah* of *al-mahdiyyūn* is frequently referred to the *sunnat ahl al-bayt* i.e. the practice of the Prophet's (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) family. The ideals embodied in the blessed Prophet could be best implemented through obedience to the divinely guided and properly designated *imāms*, descended from the blessed Prophet through his son-in-law' Alī and his daughter Fāṭimah al-Zahrā (may peace be upon them). This interpretation of

the Sy'ites is based on the claim that 'Alī was the rightful successor to the blessed Prophet Muḥammad. Indeed, nearly the Sy'ite sub groups, except the Zaydites, regarded the first three caliphs as usurpers.

The Sunnites, on the other hand, understood the *sunnah* of the *mahdiyyūn* in the broad sense. For them the *sunnah* comprises that of Abū Bakr, 'Umar b. Al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Uthmān b. 'Affan, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (known as *al-Khulafā' al-Arba'ah*) and, to some extent, includes the *sunnah* of some others from among the most influential companions (may peace be upon them). However, it is worthwhile in the present context to remark some of the Prophet's (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) *aḥādīth* as well as the prominent scholar's sayings in order to see whether or not they can bring us out of the puzzle.

If we are to trace the Prophet's *aḥādīth* on the companions concerned, we read: "*khayru ummatī al-qarnu al-ladhī bu'itstu fīhim, tsumma al-ladhīna yalūnahum, tsumma al-ladhīna yalūnahum.*" "The best among the communities is the community to which I had lived in, and then the successor (*tābi'ūn*), finally the successors of the successors (*tābi'u al-tābi'in*);" and: "*lā tasubbū aṣḥābī, fa wa al-ladhī nafsī bi yadihī lau anfaqa aḥadukum mitsla uḥudin dhahaban mā balagha mudda aḥadihim wa lā naṣīfahū.*" "Do not ever curse my companions; [I swear] by [Allāh] in whose Hand my soul rests, never ever curse my companions, that even mountain *Uḥud*-weight gold offered by one of you is equivalent neither to one of them, nor a half of him."

In the above-mentioned *aḥādīth*s, the companions are not specified. But there are numerous other sayings of the Prophet in which the name(s) of the companions are mentioned such as the following *ḥadīth*s: "*iqtaḍū bi-al-ladhaini min ba'dī Abī Bakrin wa 'Umar*" i.e. "Take both Abū Bakr and 'Umar as your model or example after my demise!" The like occurs in a report by Ḥājib b. Khalaf, who related that he heard 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz deliver a *khuṭbah* in which he said: "Take the *sunnah* of the blessed Messenger of Allāh and his two companions (i.e. Abū Bakr and 'Umar) as your last resort in religious matters; I do not pay heed to *sunnah* instituted by others."

It is worthy of noticing that the celebrated Ibn Mājah in his *Sunan* has listed the names of the most influential companions to which the Muslims community has to recourse in case a decision is to be made: first the *khulafā' al-arba'ah* respectively, and then al-Zubair, Ṭalḥah, Ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, the "Blessed Ten" (*al-ʿasyyarah al-mubasyyarūn bi al-jannah*), Abū 'Ubaidah, Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Abbās b. 'Abd. al-Muṭṭalīb, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusain, 'Ammār b. Yāsir, Salmān, Bilāl, Khabāb, Abū Dharr, Sa'd b. Mu'ādh, Jarīr b. 'Abdillāh, those who fought at the battle of *badr* and *Anṣār*, and finally Ibn 'Abbās.

However, the foregoing remarks may sufficiently permit the conclusion that immediately after the preaching of Islam had begun, the *sunnah* gradually became associated with the Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) as well as his most influential companions of right guidance. The term *sunnah* has therefore assumed its new character as "commended, approved and right way of acting." Thus the saying

'*fulān min ahl al-sunah*' (i.e. that one is of the people of the commended, approved and right way of acting) signifies and refers to those who follow the institutes, or ways of the blessed Prophet and his rightly guided companions.

The inclusion of the *ṣaḥābī's sunnah* for the Muslims community in their search for an exemplary life also rendered by the meaning of *ahl al-Jamā'ah*. This is what the majority of early scholar's interpretations seem to imply. Nevertheless, for the clarity's sake. It seems necessary first to present a concise explanation of the meaning of the term *al-Jamā'ah* to see whether it perhaps supports, or possibly invalidates, the supposition presented above.

The word *al-Jamā'ah* (syn. *Jam'un* ---a noun derived from the verb *ja-ma-'a*.) signifies *a collection; a number together; a collective body of men*. Also, *jami'un* (syn. Of *mujtami'un* contr. Of *mutafarriqun*) is used as signifying *in a state of collection, congregation, or union; being together; met together*. Contrariwise, *furqān* ---a derivatives of the verb *fa-ra-qa* [as also *fa-rra-qa* with intersification] conveys *distinction, separation, difference, division, disunity, splitting*. The saying "*fulān min ahl-al-Jamā'ah* or *laysa min ahl al-Jamā'ah*" would therefore imply one's own condition. That is the condition of being in a state of *collection, union or being together*, or being in the *jamā'ah* rather than in a a state of *separation, distinction or division* so as to split oneself from *union* and to break up into faction.

Thus we have reached the very meaning of the term *jamā'ah* as *binding the people together rather than leading them into disunity*, that is *mufarriqah*. In this way, it is virtually synonymous with *ummah* (lit. community) or to be more precise *al-ummah al-Islāmiyah*. Nevertheless, we also can retrieve the explication of the Prophet in which *jamā'ah* is expressed as parallel to: *mā anā 'alaihi wa aṣḥābī* i.e. the approved-practices or the institution of the Prophet of Allāh as well as his righteous companions. Therefore, by the term *jamā'ah* above actually the community is meant as well as the Prophet's and his companion's institution which by all means constitute what is technically called *dīn al-Islām*. Consequently, Every believer has to take the conduct of the Prophet and his companions as a model for himself in all affairs of life, for otherwise he may hardly be weighed as being a member of *Ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As noted earlier, the *sunnah* gradually acquired a new meaning of the received, recognized, normative practice of the prophet Muḥammad and, to an extent, his companions as expressed in the term *jamā'ah*, and this, as just previously mentioned, constitutes the Religion of Islām (*dīn al-Islām*). To reject or discard the above-stated *sunnah* would therefore disqualifying from being *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* and lead one away from Islam. But in order to understand what we mean by the 'criteria' of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, it

seems necessary to present a concise explanation of the meaning of the exact opposites of both the term *jamā'ah* and *sunnah*.

Because *jamā'ah* (syn. *jam'un*) in its wider meaning is equivalent to that of *al-ummah al-islāmiyyah*, its opposite term came to be represented by the word *farqun* ---a derivative of *fa-ra-qa* which has the same meaning as *fa-rra-qa*. In the Qur'ān (*Sūrat al-An'ām*, 6: 159) we read: "*inna al-ladhīna farraqū dīnahun wa kānū shiya'an lasta minhum fī shai'in...*" "As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least.."; and the like occurs in *Sūrat al-Rūm*, 30: 32: *min al-ladhīna farraqū, dīnahun wa kānū shiya'an* (i.e. "Those who split up their Religion and become mere sects...").

Commenting on these verses, both 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī and 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī assure that the expression "*farraqū dīnahun*" (lit. divide their religion) could be understood as (1) make a distinction between one part of it and another, take the part which suits them and reject the rest; or (2) make modifications or changes in it; or (3) show a sectarian bias, seek differences in views, so as to break the unity of Islam.

From the preceding interpretations of the term *farqun*, it may be argued that as Islām is perfect and conscious of its own identity from the time of revelation, it includes the whole life, thoughts and desires of man, and therefore perceives no process of 'growing up' to maturity. Any changes, modifications, resulted from the various human system for the pursuit of man --say of his sect-- of this already 'mature' religion would only to conflict it. Ultimately, a man of such a state, namely being splitting himself from this already established religion and calling for sect, must not be bracketed with the 'people of salvation' (*firqah nājiyyah*). We do considered him so plainly because of the injunction of the consecutive expression in the verse "you [Muḥammad] have no part in them in the least" (*lasta minhum fī syai'in*); and of the Prophet's (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) *ḥadīts*: "...*fa-īnnahū laisa aḥadun yufāriq al-Jamā'ah syibran fa yamut illā māta maitatan jāhiliyyatan.*" "... anyone being separated himself from the community, and dies in such a condition, the dies as the *jāhiliyyah* (lit. pagan).

Another term remains to be considered which represents the exact opposite of *sunnah* is *bid'ah*. *Bid'ah* literally means 'starting the new' or 'innovation' but it gradually became translated as 'heresy.' Thus, the use of *ahl* followed by the genitive *bid'ah* (*iḍāfāh*) means the 'people of heresy' or the people of whose idea(s) was not accepted in the course of time by the normally religious practices and beliefs which in other words contradict with the *sunnah*.

Some *ḥadīts* scholars, like G. H. A. Juynboll and M. R. Waldman on explaining the terms *sunnah* and *bid'ah* seem to confuse the matter further. In Waldman's point of view both *bid'ah* and *sunnah* can be good or bad ---bad if they contradict the accepted *sunnah*, and good if they are consistent with it, even if

they not contained init, and promoted the good of the community. Whereas Juynboll insists that *bid'ah* never developed into a heresy. Nonetheless, these scholars, while the former appears to have recourse his argument from the Prophet's (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) *ḥadīts*, which runs:

He who institutes a *fair sunnah* in Islām, so that it is practiced after his death, to him a reward shall be given equal to that of all who have practiced it, without anything being deducted from their reward, but, he who institutes a *bad sunnah* in Islām, so that it is practiced after his death, against him a sin shall be debited, like that of all who have practiced it without anything being subtracted from their sins.

The latter bases his account from a saying attributed to 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb: "...in takun *bid'atan fa mā aḥsana min bid'ah.*" i.e. "... if this is a *bid'ah*, it is an *excellent one*.

It seems that both Juynboll and Waldman mislaid the point. Firstly, the literal meanings of both these sayings may not be applicable. For if they were otherwise, they would possibly invalidate the very meaning of the terms (*sunnah* and *bid'ah*). Secondly, the expressions such as a *fair sunnah* (*sunnah ḥasanah*) and a *bad sunnah* (*sunnah sayyi'ah*) must be bracketed with *hudan* and *ḍalālah* respectively. Therefore, there are no such things called *sunnah ḥasanah* or *sunnah sayyi'ah*, rather, *sunnah ḥasanah* is the *approved* or *right way* (*hudan*) and *sunnah sayyi'ah* is *straying from the right way* or *error* (*ḍalālah*). And this is what the Prophet means to imply in his *ḥadīts*:

Man da'ā ilā hudan kāna lahū min al-ajri mitslu ujūri yatbi'uh, lā yanquṣu dhālika min ujūrihim syai'an, wa man da'ā ilā ḍalālatin kāna 'alaihi min al-itsmi mitslu ātsāmi man yatbi'uh, lā yanquṣu dhālika min ātsāmihim syai'an. (i.e. He who calls for the right way so that it is practiced [after his death] to him a reward shall be given equal to that of all who have practiced it without anything being deducted from their reward. But he who calls for error so that it is practiced [after his death] against him a sin shall be debited like that of who have practiced it without anything being subtracted from their sin).

A similar case can also be applied to that of *bid'ah*. The expressions *bid'ah ḥasanah* and *bid'ah sayyi'ah* should therefore be understood as *sunnah* or *hudan*, for it is indeed *sunnah* in the making ---in so far as the companions' *sunnah* are concerned--- and *ḍalālah*, respectively. It is for this reason, in our opinion, that the Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) loudly prophesied his hostility against those who *come up with something new*. In this long passages, we read, for example:

... *wa iyyākum wa muḥdatsāt al-umūr fa innahā ḍalālah, ... fa 'alaykum bi sunnatī wa sunnat al-hkulafā' al-rāshidīn al-mahdiyyīn, ...* i.e. be not *come up with something new*, for it is an error, ... hold fast to the *sunnatī* (institution of the Prophet Muḥammad) as well as the institution of the companions, ...

Likewise, but more precisely, we found the Prophet said:

... *wa aḥsan al-hadyi hadyu Muḥammadin, alā wa iyyākum wa muḥdatsāt al-umūr fa inna syarr al-umūri muḥdataātuhā, wa kullu muḥdatsātin bid'ah, wa kullu bid'atin ḍalālah* ... i.e. the best guide is Muḥammad's guidance (*sunnah*), invent not *new things* [in Islām], for they will promote *bid'ah*, and know that *bid'ah* is an error...

We have previously investigated that the terms *farqun* and *bid'ah* represent the opposite terms of *jamā'ah* and *sunnah* respectively. We have also shown that the expressions such as *sunnah ḥasanah=bid'ah ḥasanah* is nothing but *hudan=sunnah* while *sunnah sayyi'ah=bid'ah sayyi'ah* is itself *bid'ah=ḍalālah* in the making.

Indeed, *jamā'ah* or the community of Islām (*ummah Islāmiyyah*) consisted almost solely of groups of people (*ummah Islāmiyyah*) who were collectively characterized by an activity, social status and commonly held opinion. Therefore to bring a member of *ahl al-Jamā'ah* and *ahl al-sunnah*, one must first wittingly subdue one self in it (*jamā'ah*) and, secondly, refrains from propagating *bid'ah=ḍalālah*. And this is what most probably the *sataftariqu* tradition seems to have indicated. As if the Prophet tells us that *to attain salvation, one should neither separate oneself (farraqa) from the community or the jamā'ah nor come up with something new (bid'ah) in Islām.*

Conclusion

Some remarks to be drawn from the analysis of the terms *sunnah* and *jamā'ah* advanced above, as follows: (1) *Sunnah* is the approved standard or practice introduced by the Prophet (may Allāh bless and give him peace!) as well as the *imām* or companions of right guidance, and these constitute the religion of Islām. (2) The term *jamā'ah* which is equated with *ummah* presents a concise meaning as being together, union and collection. Such that, binding the people together in the community who were collectively characterized by an activity, social status and commonly held opinion, rather than leading them into disunity (*mufarriqah*). (3) The expression such as *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, as in the *staftariqu* tradition, can probably no longer be conceived as referring to a certain Muslim's school of thought nor to a sect, rather, is addressed to those who follow the institution of the Prophet and his righteous companions. As such this institution must in no other way round be accepted as 'the straight way.' Therefore, any one whether breaks up (*farraqa*, an opposite term of *jamā'ah*) from this already established institution or comes up (*ibtada'a*, cont. *sanna*) with something new in Islām render one hardly be labeled as *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.

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