Arabic term for “way of acting.” The ancient Arab concept *sunna* (pl. *sunan*) occurs eighteen times in the Qurʾān. Generally — that is to say outside the strict context of the Qurʾān — it is defined as a way of acting, whether approved or disapproved, and is normally associated with the people of earlier generations, whose example has to be followed or shuffled by later generations. The concept occupies a crucial place in Islam. In the development of Islamic theology, it eventually came to be associated with orthodoxy, the bastion against heterodox innovation (*bidʿa*; see INNOVATION; THEOLOGY AND THE QURʾĀN; for a study of the first adherents of sunna, see Juynboll, Excursus on the *ahl as-sunna*).

As far as the qurʾānic context is concerned, the occurrences of the term can roughly be divided into two categories: “sunna” either denotes God’s *way* of dealing with the as-yet unbelieving people of the *world*, or it is a *word* for the *behavior* of those rebellious unbelievers who refuse to comply with divine institutions by declining to submit to divine messengers (see INSOLENCE AND OBSTINACY; MESSENGER; BELIEF AND UNBELIEF; REBELLION). Examples of sunna within the first category comprise references to God’s treatment of anonymous unbelievers in the Meccan verse Q 40:85 (see CHRONOLOGY AND THE QURʾĀN), or Qurashis and/or the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*; see QURAYSH; HYOCRITES AND HYPOCRISY) in the Medinan verses Q 17:77, 33:38, 62 and 48:23. Examples of sunna within the second category refer in the Meccan sūras to anonymous peoples (cf. Q 15:13, 18:55, 35:43) and in a Medinan sūra to the prophet Muḥammad’s Meccan adversaries among the Quraysh (cf. Q 8:38; see OPPOSITION TO MUḤAMMAD). Moreover, in the Medinan verse Q 3:137 the plural *sunan* is glossed by al-Ṭabarānī (d. 310/923; *Tafsīr*, iv, 99) as *mathulāt*, i.e. the punitive measures meted out to pre-Islamic peoples like Ṭā ṣ (q.v.) and *Thamūd* (q.v.), who refused to heed the preaching of prophets sent to them by God (see PROPHETS AND PROPHETHOOD), whereas in the other Medinan verse in which the plural occurs (Q 4:26) it stands for the pious “ways of life” of certain people and prophets of old (see GENERATIONS).

In addition to these uses of the term *sunna* in the Qurʾān, the concept of sunna can be traced along various lines, encompassing a number of different nuances. Some of these were later tentatively traced back to the Qurʾān, that is to say, to qurʾānic lexemes other than *sunna*, where it was thought that sunna was implied. Initially, *sunna* was a neutral term for good or bad precedents set by earlier generations, and it played a crucial role in the evolution of Islamic law, the *sharīʿa* (see LAW AND THE QURʾĀN). In the course of the second/eighth century, sunna came to be considered one of the roots (*uṣūl*) of Islamic law, indeed, after the Qurʾān, the second most important root. It was the legal theoretician al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) who was especially instrumental in raising the concept of sunna to this unassailable level of legal authority. As a legislative source, the Qurʾān contains a fair number of injunctions that are pivotal in the formulation of laws dictating human behavior. But most of these injunctions are worded in terms that are either too broad, or ambiguous (q.v.) or downright opaque. Analyzing, and where possible elucidating, those terms became the task of early Islamic exegetes (see EXEGESIS OF THE QURʾĀN: CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL). These commentators acted in conformity with the gradually prevailing rule that, rather than an example set by any religious expert, a corroborative prophetic example had to be adduced. Thus these exegetes sought and disseminated reports (*ahādīth*) which transmitted what the prophet Muḥammad and the earliest learned authorities (*ulamāʾ*) had allegedly said concerning certain qurʾānic verses and, where relevant, their application in daily life (see SĪRA AND THE QURʾĀN; TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES OF QURʾĀNIC STUDY). Among the earliest strata of authorities, the prophet Muḥammad was to play an increasingly important role. One indispensable need was clarification of obscure qurʾānic passages, and this need is reflected in a number of wide-
ranging traditions, for which the introduction to the collection of al-Dārīmī (d. 255/869) is especially famous. More than his fellow traditionists, it was al-Dārīmī who brought together a number of ḥadīths that dealt with the issue of the inter-dependence of Qurʾān and sunna (see ḤADĪTH AND THE QURʾĀN). That most of these sayings are probably of his own making may be deduced from their absence from other early collections ascribed to his peers. Perhaps the most concise among the somewhat later sayings is the one that runs: “the Qurʾān needs [the elucidation contained in the] sunna more than the other way around” (inna l-Qurʾān ʿaḥwaju ilā l-sunna mina l-sunna ilā l-Qurʾān; cf. the theologian al-Barbahārī [d. 329/941] in his Kitāb al-Sunna, which Ibn Abī Yaʿlā [d. 526/1131] extensively quotes in his Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābīla [cf. ii, 25]).

The inter-relatedness of Qurʾān and sunna was transferred gradually to the delicate field of abrogation (q.v.; naskh). Initially it went without saying that a qurʾānic passage could abrogate a sunna; but eventually the question was raised whether a sunna laid down, for instance, in a prophetic ḥadīth, could perhaps abrogate a qurʾānic injunction. The statement “sunna may determine the Qurʾān but not vice versa” (al-sunna qādiyatuṭn ‘alā l-Qurʾān wa-laysa al-Qurʾān bi-qādiṭn ‘alā l-sunna) is ascribed to an early authority, Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr (d. 132/749) but is probably al-ʾĪ’s Dārīmī’s own handiwork (cf. his Sunan, i, 153, no. 587). This highly controversial issue kept theologians and jurisprudents occupied for a considerable period. In early tafsīr literature there are no discernible attempts to equate certain terms from scripture with sunna or, specifically prophetic sunna (sunnat al-nabī). It was the aforementioned legal scholar al-Shāfīʿī who was the first to try to link an important qurʾānic term with sunna, in an attempt to provide scriptural evidence for his insistence that sunna should automatically be equated with sunnat al-nabī. The word chosen by him was ḥikma, “wisdom” (e.g. his Risāla, 32, 78, etc.); but even after his lifetime this identification does not seem to have caught on with other jurists. The only explanation early exegetes like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Qatāda b. Dīʿāma (d. 117/735) are alleged to have offered for al-ḥikma was simply the gloss al-sunna without further specification (cf. Tafsīr al-ḥasan al-ṣāfī, i, 115, Ṭabarī, Tafsīr, i, 557, ad Q 2:129). Then, at the hands of al-Shāfīʿī, that is extended to sunnat rasūlī ilāh. The verse that comes to mind most readily as providing a good opportunity for tracing the concept of sunna of the Prophet and/or that of his faithful followers in the Qurʾān, is Q 33:21: “You had (conceivably: have) in the messenger of God a perfect example...”; but al-Shāfīʿī did not even hint at this verse in his Risāla. It is the traditionist Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) who mentions the verse (cf. his Musnad, ii, 15 = ed. A.M. Shākir, no. 4641) in connection with sunna. The debate was couched in cautious terms, lest a sunna, which is after all a custom instituted by man, be too readily taken to be capable of abrogating or modifying the prima facie interpretation of scripture, which is, after all, of divine origin.

Another term bracketed with al-sunna next to the Qurʾān is the word ḥabl, “rope, † cord,” in Q 3:103 (cf. Ibn Ḥajar, Fath al-bārī, xvii, 3, apud Bukhārī, K. al-ṣīṣām, 1). In exegetical literature, however, ḥabl is almost exclusively associated with the Qurʾān, or the religion, or the community (jamāʿa) of believers, but not with sunna.

The term sunna does not occur more often than in the verses dealt with above, whereas there are numerous qurʾānic passages in which sunna and/or its derivative sunnat al-nabī are quite clearly intended. The frequently repeated command that the believers must obey God and his messenger (cf. Kassis, Concordance, s.v. ṣāṭa, “to obey”; see OBEDIENCE) can virtually always be construed as pointing to submission to the exemplary behavior of the Prophet.
Sunna

Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān

G.H.A. Juynboll

Bibliography

i. Primary:


al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Tafsīr, ed. M. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, Cairo [1992]

Ibn Abī Yalā, Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiṣṭīqī, Cairo 1952

Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqālānī, Fatḥ al-bārī bi-shahr ʿṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Cairo 1959

al-Shāfiʿī, Muḥammad b. Idrīs, Risāla, ed. A.M. Shākir, Cairo 1940

ii. Secondary:


id., Some new ideas on the development of sunna as a technical term in early Islam, in JSAI 10 (1987), 97-118

id., Sunna, in EI 2, ix, 878-81

H.E. Kassis, A concordance of the Qurʾān, Berkeley 1983

[Print Version: Volume 5, page 163, column 2]

Citation:


<http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_SIM-00408>