

The Prophet's Night Prayers

An Exploration of Flexibility and Devotion in Islamic Worship

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Sayyidah Aisha رضي الله عنها remarked,, “During Ramadan, as well as at other times, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم never exceeded eleven units in his nightly prayer. He would perform four units, their beauty and length beyond query, followed by another four, equally impeccable. Lastly, he would pray three units of prayer.”

Aiesha's رضي الله عنها description was collected by Malik in “Al-Muwatta,” as well as by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, and Nasa'i, based on the account of Abu Salama bin Abdur-Rahman bin Auf. He asked Aisha رضي الله عنها regarding the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم prayer routine during Ramadan. Her response illuminates not merely a practice but an example, illustrating the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم devotion and the profound contemplation embodied within his prayers.

Scholarly Understandings

Some scholars, adhering strictly to the narrative's apparent implications, advocate that eleven cycles of prayer are the definitive Sunnah. This interpretation spawns the opinion that any deviation from this prescribed number constitutes an innovation in religion- a departure from the prophetic tradition- thus branding the innovator as misguided, based on the principle that every innovation leads astray. However, this perspective is critically flawed, emerging from a constricted intellect and a limited depth. The fallacy of this interpretation is obvious if one considers the following:

Textual Discrepancies & Flexibility

Firstly, the narrations from Sayyidah Aisha رضي الله عنها herself on this matter: the number of cycles of his صلى الله عليه وسلم night prayer, are not the same; discrepancies exist, suggesting a diversity embedded within the authentic traditions. This variance undercuts the argument for a singularly prescribed number of units in nightly prayers, advocating instead for a broader understanding of prophetic tradition.

Qadi Iyad discusses Aisha's رضي الله عنها reports on the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم night prayers, highlighting the variations in the number of units (rak'ahs) prayed. These variations, from eleven to thirteen, including the two units of the Fajr prayer, underscore the diverse practices observed by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. In one account, Aisha mentions that the Prophet never exceeded eleven units during Ramadan or otherwise, typically praying in sets of four and three units. In another account, she describes him praying thirteen units, including the two units of the Fajr prayer.

Further, it is noted that in his later years, the length of his prayer increased due to longer recitations, or the number might vary due to time constraints, sleep, or illness.

The interpretation provided by Qadi Iyad suggests that these discrepancies stem either from Aisha رضي الله عنها herself or from the transmitters of these narrations. The predominant view is that the report of eleven units represents the most frequent practice, with the other narrations indicating rare variations depending on circumstances like available time, the Prophet's health, or specific nightly rituals. The inclusion of the two light units at the beginning of the night, as narrated by others, points to a nuanced understanding of the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم prayer habits, emphasizing adaptability and personal discretion in voluntary devotional acts.

Qadi Iyad articulates a consensus among scholars that there is no fixed limit to the number of units (rak'ahs) in night prayer beyond which one cannot go; increasing in such acts of worship brings more reward and is not diminished in merit. This perspective underscores the personalized nature of the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم prayer habits as examples of his choices. Rather than rigid prescriptions. Furthermore, there exist narratives that offer alternative numbers of rakat to the assumed standard for nightly prayers, challenging the notion that deviation from this count constitutes an innovation (bid'ah). For instance, a hadith narrated by Jabir رضي الله عنه states that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم led prayers during Ramadan with eight units followed by the Witr prayer. This incident illustrates a flexibility in the practice, which he صلى الله عليه وسلم feared might become obligatory if performed consistently.

Scholars like Sheikh Muhammad Zakariya al-Kandahlawi and Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf al-Binnori, eminent figures in the study of hadith, have commented on these variations. Sheikh al-Kandahlawi raises questions about the reliability of certain narrators in Jabir's hadith, indicating the nuanced scrutiny applied by scholars to ensure the authenticity of reported practices. Sheikh al-Binnori emphasizes that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم also prayed eight units of Tarawih, suggesting that in the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم time there was no established practice of separating tarawih and tahajjud prayers during Ramadan. Additionally, Imam Lucknawi and other scholars, such as al-Baghawi and Ibn Hajar, investigate this matter by examining the practices of religious scholars that have evolved over centuries, acknowledging the diversity in the number of units prayed during the nights of Ramadan. Finally, there's a scholarly acknowledgment of a prophetic narration supporting twenty rak'ahs for Tarawih, a practice that has gained widespread acceptance across the Islamic world, including in the holy cities, and traced back to the era of the Companions.

The Precedence of Flexibility Is A Proof

The debate over the correct number of rak'ahs underscores a broader principle in Islamic jurisprudence: the avoidance of rigid dogmatism in matters of worship where flexibility has been historically observed. The strong critique against labeling one practice as the sunnah to the exclusion of others, or deeming any deviation as bid'ah (innovation), reflects a commitment to preserving the diversity and richness of Islamic practice. Such rigid claims, especially those denouncing twenty rak'ahs as an innovation, are contested vigorously, with scholars arguing

that such positions demonstrate a misunderstanding of the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ sunnah and an ignorance of the flexibility allowed within certain acts of worship.

The narrative regarding the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ practice during Ramadan includes various reports on the number of rak'ahs he performed, which has led to a rich scholarly discourse over centuries. According to Ibn Abbas, the Prophet prayed twenty rak'ahs and performed the Witr prayer during Ramadan. This tradition has been transmitted through several chains of narration, including those collected by Ibn Abi Shaybah, see below, Al-Tabarani, Al-Bayhaqi, and further discussed by Abu al-Fath Sulaim ibn Ayub al-Razi in his book on encouragement towards worship.

Imam al-Lucknawi, along with other scholars like Ibn Hajar, has cited these narrations, noting their presence in the practice of the early Muslim community, particularly in the two holy sanctuaries, and their widespread acceptance across the Muslim world. It's highlighted that there's no compulsion on the faithful to strictly adhere to this number; flexibility is allowed, acknowledging the validity of praying eleven rak'ahs or even eight, as reported in another narration by Ibn Habban from Jabir, stating that the Prophet ﷺ prayed eight rak'ahs followed by the Witr. Ibn Hajar and others have elaborated on these varying accounts to reconcile the diversity of practices reported from the time of the Prophet and his companions. The narrative from Ibn Abi Shaybah, mentioned above, describing the Prophet's ﷺ practice of praying twenty rak'ahs in Ramadan, aside from the Witr, is criticized due to its chain's weakness, particularly in Abu Shaybah's chain, the narrator Ibrahim bin Uthman. This critique is echoed by scholars like Al-Faqih Abu Al-Fath Sulaim bin Ayub Al-Razi, who, despite acknowledging the report, highlights its narratorial deficiencies.

Imam al-Suyuti, in his research on tarawih, notes that while there are numerous reports ranging in authenticity from sound to weak, encouraging the observance of night prayers during Ramadan, there is no specific number of rak'ahs firmly established through direct evidence from the Prophet's ﷺ practice. The emphasis is rather on the act of performing the night prayers itself as a highly encouraged sunnah, derived from the Prophet's ﷺ general encouragement and practice without specifying a number.

The essence of these scholarly discussions culminates in recognizing the Tarawih prayer as a confirmed sunnah due to the Prophet's ﷺ emphasis on the merits of night prayers during Ramadan. This is further illustrated by a narration from Salman al-Farsi, as reported by several scholars including Ibn Khuzaimah in his Sahih, where the Prophet heralded the coming of Ramadan as a blessed month, mandating fasting by day and establishing night prayer as a voluntary act of devotion, underscoring the virtue of seeking closeness to Allah through additional acts of worship during this month. These narrations collectively emphasize the immense value, blessings and rewards associated with fasting and performing night prayers during Ramadan:

1. The Prophet ﷺ highlighted the extraordinary merits of performing voluntary good deeds in Ramadan, equating them to the performance of obligatory acts outside of

Ramadan, and performing an obligatory deed in Ramadan to performing seventy obligatory deeds at other times. This hadith underscores the magnified rewards available in Ramadan, encouraging believers to intensify their worship during this holy month.

2. Abdur Rahman bin Auf رضي الله عنه reports the Prophet's ﷺ words about Ramadan, illustrating the sanctity of the month where fasting is mandated by Allah, and the night prayer (Tarawih) is sunnah established by the Prophet. The hadith promises the expiation of sins for those who fast and pray during Ramadan with faith and seeking reward, likening their state to the innocence of the day they were born, emphasizing the purification and renewal available to believers in this blessed month.
3. The narrations about the Prophet's ﷺ practices during Ramadan, such as tightening his belt, staying away from his bed, and dedicating himself more intensively to worship, especially in the last ten nights, illustrate his devotion and determination to seek the special virtues of Ramadan. This includes seeking Laylat al-Qadr, a night better than a thousand months, through increased prayer, reflection, and devotion.
4. The collective practice of Qiyam-ul-Ramadan (Tarawih) is highlighted as a confirmed Sunnah. The Prophet ﷺ led prayers in congregation on some nights and would have continued to do so regularly if not for the concern that it might become obligatory for his Ummah. This practice, therefore, holds a special place in Islamic worship, being highly recommended and a means to attain closeness to Allah during Ramadan.

Observing 20 Cycles of Tarwaih A Practice Of The Salaf

The practice of Tarawih prayers, especially the tradition of performing twenty rak'ahs, is deeply rooted in the early Islamic community, extending beyond the prophetic practice to the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. While the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself did not establish a specific number of rak'ahs for Tarawih, his companions and the early Muslim community, under the guidance of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, embraced the practice of twenty rak'ahs in congregation, assigning separate imams for men and women, indicating the community's acceptance and valorization of this practice.

The legislative persistence on twenty rak'ahs by the Rightly Guided Caliphs is seen as binding, illustrating a broader principle of adherence not only to the Prophet's Sunnah but also to the traditions established by his immediate successors. This perspective is supported by the principle in Islamic jurisprudence that the collective practices of the companions, especially those of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, carry significant weight and can be considered as complementary to the prophetic traditions.

The debate around the number of rak'ahs and the reference to the hadith urging Muslims to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet and the practices of the Rightly Guided Caliphs underscores the importance of consensus and continuity in Islamic practices. The interpretation of legislative persistence and the application of principles of Islamic jurisprudence affirm the twenty rak'ahs as a well-established practice, reflecting a balance between strict adherence to prophetic examples and the dynamic application of these examples by the early Muslim community to cater to the ummah's religious needs.

Navigating The Narrations

Concerning the apparent discrepancy with the narrations from Aisha رضي الله عنها about the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم

not exceeding eleven rak'ahs in his night prayers, scholars like Al-Qurtubi have noted that such reports do not necessarily conflict with the practice of twenty rak'ahs in tarawih. This is because the conditions, context, and types of prayers (Tahajjud vs. Tarawih) being referred to might differ, and each narration offers insights into different aspects of the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم and the early community's prayer practices. This nuanced understanding allows for the reconciliation of these diverse narrations, illustrating the flexibility within Islamic worship and the significance of the early community's consensus in establishing religious practices, especially those pertaining to voluntary acts of worship like the tarawih prayers.

Al-Lucknawi's response to the argument that any additional prayers would not have been unknown to Aisha is particularly instructive. He points out instances, such as the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم praying thirteen rak'ahs in the house of Maymuna رضي الله عنها, one of his wives, which Aisha رضي الله عنها was unaware of. Similarly, the practice of the duha prayer (forenoon prayer), though not regularly observed by Aisha رضي الله عنها, was indeed part of the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم spiritual regimen, as evidenced by multiple hadith narrations across several collections, including Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.

This demonstrates the complexity of understanding the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم practices based solely on the reports of even his closest companions, acknowledging that no single companion could witness all aspects of his worship. Aisha's رضي الله عنها narrations provide valuable insights into the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم practices, but they represent her perspective and experiences, which might not encompass every aspect of his worship routines.

Al-Suyuti's acknowledgment that the Prophet's adherence to certain practices varied and was not constant further supports the idea that voluntary Islamic worship practices, including the number of rak'ahs in night prayers, are adaptable. This adaptability is rooted in the broader principles of worship in Islam, allowing for variations in practice to accommodate the diverse capacities and spiritual states of individuals.

Aisha's statement that she did not observe the Prophet performing the Duha prayer, while other companions like Ibn Abbas and Jabir provided different numbers of rak'ahs for the night prayers, illustrates the broader principle that the companions reported based on their direct observations and experiences. This diversity of reports indicates the Prophet's flexibility in his voluntary worship routines, adapting his prayers to the circumstances of travel, residence, time constraints, or personal vigor. This nuanced understanding acknowledges that the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم practices could vary (when not obligatory) and that he tailored his worship to fit different contexts, including the distribution of his time among his wives, which might have resulted in certain practices being less observed by some companions, including Aisha, in specific instances.

The reconciliation of these diverse narrations lies in recognizing that the Prophet's ﷺ devotional practice was characterized by a balance between consistency and adaptability. This approach allows for a comprehensive view of his sunnah, accommodating variations that arose from his circumstances and personal choices. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the sunnah in a broad and inclusive manner, respecting the diversity of authentic prophetic practices as reported by his companions.

Interpreting Hadith Is A Serious Endeavor

This discussion also reminds us of the caution required in interpreting hadiths and the significance of considering the context and the comprehensive body of Islamic scholarship. It highlights the importance of not hastily dismissing certain practices or reports just because they might not align perfectly with one report or another. Instead, it invites a deeper exploration and understanding of the prophetic traditions, taking into account the varied contexts in which these practices were observed and reported.

This inclusive approach to the sunnah reflects the mercy and flexibility inherent in Islamic teachings, allowing Muslims to connect with their faith in a way that is both authentic to the prophetic example and adaptable to the realities of their own lives. It underlines the importance of scholarly interpretation and the need for Muslims to engage with the teachings of Islam in a thoughtful, informed manner, guided by the knowledge and wisdom of those who have dedicated their lives to studying the religious texts.

Reasons For Variations

The variations in the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ prayer practices, whether due to illness, age, or other circumstances, illustrate the adaptability and flexibility within Islamic worship. For instance, Aisha رضي الله عنها mentioned that as the Prophet ﷺ aged, he would sometimes pray seven rak'ahs. At times, the two light rak'ahs at the beginning of the night or the witr prayer at the end were counted differently or omitted, reflecting variations in practice. This diversity, including the practice of the regular Sunnah prayers of Isha, should not be seen as divisive or condemnable as long as it adheres to the principles of scholarly inquiry and aims to ascertain the truth of the Prophet's ﷺ actions and preferences.

Hence, disagreement over the number of rak'ahs prayed should not lead to condemnation of those who perform additional acts of worship, striving in obedience and seeking to increase their devotional acts. Unfortunately, some who claim to possess knowledge have used this disagreement as a basis for rejection, branding any increase beyond eleven rak'ahs as an innovation, deviance, or even heresy, and have gone as far as to arbitrate on the reward and acceptance of such prayers, which only Allah knows. They argue that any extra prayers do not count as the tarawih legislated in the sunnah and that the reward is only for prayer in its sense.

This stance, based on a narrow understanding and a failure to grasp the wisdom and spirit of Islamic legislation, is itself an innovation and a misguidance. The scholars' discussion on this matter is not aimed at rigidly defining actions or denouncing increased devotion as innovation or

misguidance. Instead, it seeks to highlight the Sharia's tolerance and flexibility, showing the comprehensive and merciful nature of Islamic teachings.

The exploration of the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ night prayers, especially as he aged and the considerations for light rak'ahs at the beginning of the night, serves as a broader inquiry into understanding the nuances of his Sunnah. This quest for truth encompasses various aspects attributed to him, seeking to accurately discern his words, actions, or tacit approvals to honor the pure aunnah. Such endeavors reflect the scholarly commitment to uncovering the reality of the Prophet's ﷺ practices, whether it relates to the specifics of his prayers or other matters of religious observance.

Regarding prayers named tarawih or night prayers (Qiyam al-Layl) or by any other designation, these acts of worship aim to deepen understanding and increase righteousness. Imam Al-Qadi lyad highlights the absence of a definitive limit to the night prayer that cannot be exceeded or diminished. He emphasizes that the night prayer is among the acts of devotion where increasing in it only adds to one's reward. The debate primarily concerns the Prophet's ﷺ specific practices and his personal choices.

Allah knows best